GUARDIAN
ZHEN HUN
1
FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR
priest

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Seven Seas

Seven Seas Entertainment

GUARDIAN: ZHEN HUN VOL. 1

Published originally under the title of《镇魂》(Zhen Hun)
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Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to Marketing Manager Lianne Sentar at press@gomanga.com. Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

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ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-63858-936-5
Printed in Canada
First Printing: August 2023
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

晋江文学城
WWW.JJWXC.NET

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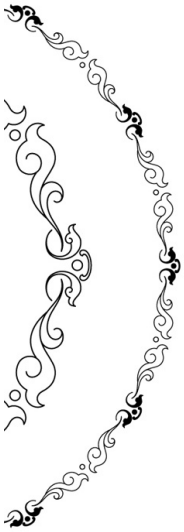

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PRELUDE

4 BRIGHT AVENUE

IT WAS THE FIFTEENTH DAY of the seventh lunar month, and the sky was still dark.

Night owls large and small had already returned to their nests. At this time, even the busy streets of Dragon City had begun to empty. Only the occasional insect call emerged from the bushes—sometimes there, sometimes not, making you feel nervous and jumpy.

It was 2:30 a.m. Dew began to appear and the air grew moist, sticky with humidity.

Perhaps it was the wind that made it appear as if the shadow of *something* constantly hovered in corners. Walking down the street, it seemed like something was always behind you, staring.

It was at this hour that Guo Changcheng walked into the courtyard of 4 Bright Avenue, clutching his notice.

Guo Changcheng, having lost both of his parents at a young age, had been brought up by relatives. He had an unremarkable appearance, had stumbled through a third-rate university, and in terms of personality, was unsociable and cowardly. Unable to find a job after graduation, he had stayed at home doing nothing for the larger part of a year. Some time later, his second uncle, who'd begun to rise through the ranks in the Ministry of Public Security, had forged the necessary connections to find a useless job for his useless nephew, to at least give him something to do.

Guo Changcheng had assumed his future would involve wearing a uniform, parking himself in the gatehouse, making a pot of tea when he got there, working nine to five, and welcoming and bidding farewell to visitors…until this peculiar "Letter of Acceptance" arrived.

When Guo Changcheng first received it, he'd thought someone had made a mistake. In very official Communist-red print, it declared:

Comrade Guo Changcheng,

Congratulations on your acceptance into our department. Here you will enjoy the benefits of a State Civil Servant, while also bearing the weighty responsibility of serving the people. We hope that from this day forward, at this new job, you will be passionate about your work, respect your position, forge ahead with determination, obey your leaders, love and stand in unity with your colleagues, and contribute to the social stability and national prosperity of the country.

On August 31 (the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month) at 2:30 a.m., please bring your Resident Identity Card and this Letter of Acceptance and report to our department in a timely manner (Address: 4 Bright Avenue, first floor, HR Department).

On behalf of all the employees in our department, we welcome you as our good comrade.

People's Republic of China,
Ministry of Public Security

Special Investigations Department
X year, X month X day

Usually, when asked to report at such a bizarre time, a normal person would assume there was a typo and would at least call ahead to confirm. But Guo Changcheng had always been terrified of social interactions, and staying at home for more than half a year had given him a severe case of telephone phobia. As soon as he even thought about having to call someone, he felt so stressed that he couldn't sleep for nights on end.

He procrastinated in this way until midnight on the day of August 31, and he still hadn't made the call.

And so Guo Changcheng came up with an idea that he thought would be the best of both worlds: he decided to pull an all-nighter. At 2:30 a.m., he would go take a look. If no one was there, he would go to the nearby McDonald's and make do for the night. Then, at 2:30 p.m., he would go back. Either way, he would be there at the correct time.

In the middle of the night, all public transportation had stopped running. Guo Changcheng's only option was to drive himself. With much difficulty and the help of a GPS, he finally found the right place.

It turned out that 4 Bright Avenue wasn't right on a street but rather in a well-hidden courtyard. Guo Changcheng stood at the yard's gate and examined it closely for a long while before using his cell phone light to find the house number on a little plaque under the thick ivy. Below the building number, a tiny row of words carved into the rock said: Special Investigations Department. Under that was a Public Security logo.

The landscaping inside the courtyard was very well done. At the entrance was a parking lot, and when you walked in, there was a row of pagoda trees with leaves so thick and dense they resembled a small forest. Only a narrow path was left open. After Guo Changcheng passed through, he finally saw a little building that looked like the gatehouse.

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There really was someone inside—the lights were still on. Through the window, Guo Changcheng saw a uniformed silhouette wearing a police hat, with a newspaper in hand. Once in a while, they flipped the page. Guo Changcheng took a deep breath, so nervous his hands were sweating. His empty brain didn't even have time to consider why the doorman was still at work at this hour.

"I'm here to report, this is my letter of acceptance. I'm here to report, this is my letter of acceptance. I'm here to report, this is my letter of acceptance."

Guo Changcheng mumbled to himself like he was reciting a textbook, the lines tumbling around and around in his mouth dozens of times. He finally gritted his teeth, walked over, and knocked shakily on the gatehouse window. Before the person within had fully looked up, Guo Changcheng said, in a breath as weak as thread, as if uttering his last words, "I-I'm here to acceptance… This is my letter of report…"

Confused, the middle-aged man in the gatehouse put down his newspaper and asked, "Huh?"

In spite of his efforts, he'd still managed to mangle his lines. Guo Changcheng wanted to cry, but he didn't have the tears. The stress turned his face into a purple sweet potato.

Mercifully, the man saw the letter of acceptance in his hand and immediately understood. "Oh… Oh! You're our new comrade, right? How should I address you? Oh, I see it! Xiao-Guo! We haven't had a new person in quite a few years. So, not easy finding this place, is it?"

Guo Changcheng finally let out the breath he had been holding. He loved people like this, warm and brimming with enthusiasm. As long as the other person's mouth was moving, he only had to nod or shake his head. No need to string words together.

"Let me tell you, you're in luck. It just so happens that our boss is here tonight as well. Come, I'll take you to meet him."

As soon as Guo Changcheng heard that, his hair stood on end. He didn't feel lucky at all—rather, he felt a puff of misfortune float up from his head like a ghost.

Guo Changcheng was good for nothing. Powerful people, such as bosses, were his greatest fear. Ever since childhood, the mere sight of a teacher made his calf cramp. If he saw the principal, even from twenty meters away, he would still change paths to avoid them. He was clearly a law-abiding citizen, but every time he saw the armed police who stood guard on National Day, he reacted like a mouse who'd spied a cat, which made other people throw suspicious glances his way.

Meet the *boss*? You might as well ask him to go meet a ghost!

Just as cold sweat began to pour out of him in buckets, there came the sound of footsteps. A young man walked out of 4 Bright Avenue's little garden with long strides. There was a cigarette in his mouth, and his hands were shoved in his pants pockets. He was tall, with upright shoulders, thick brows, deep-set eyes, and a defined nose. He was very handsome, even if his expression was a little dark.

The man's brows were furrowed, and he walked so fast that wind seemed to rise in his footsteps. The message on his face was clear: "Don't block the way, don't bug me, and fuck off."

In a stroke of misfortune, Guo Changcheng happened to meet his gaze and was immediately terrified by those black eyes, beautiful yet cold. His instinct told him

that this hot guy had a bad temper.

But when the hot-tempered hottie realized who Guo Changcheng was, he suddenly braked. In the next moment, his expression transformed, fluid as that of a master actor. That thunderous look was abruptly one of sunshine and open skies, with a kind smile that spread naturally across his face faster than one could turn a page. Along with that smile, two shallow dimples appeared on his cheeks. The cigarette still in his mouth made the corners of his lips seem a bit crooked. With his eyes crinkled a little, he seemed as if he might be up to no good—but just the right amount of no good, which lent him an approachable air.

"See, speak of the devil! Come, young man, and get to know him. This is our boss." The doorman gave Guo Changcheng a shove. Guo Changcheng stumbled forward half a step and heard the person behind him say loudly, "Director Zhao, we finally have a new coworker."

Director Zhao extended a hand toward Guo Changcheng, open and friendly. "Hello, hello! The warmest of welcomes."

Guo Changcheng rubbed his damp palms on his pants as if his body wasn't under his control and then, embarrassingly, extended the wrong hand. He shrank back at once like he'd been electrocuted. The armpits and back of his T-shirt were immediately soaked in sweat. A new world map slowly took shape on his shirt.

Director Zhao didn't give him a hard time. Instead, he patted Guo Changcheng's shoulder as if nothing had happened. Casual pleasantries rolled easily off his tongue. "Don't be nervous; all the comrades who work here are friendly and united. Now, today's your first day, so I should take you around and introduce you to everyone, but the thing is, today's also a special day. We're honestly just too busy. We might not be able to get you properly settled for a bit; I hope you don't mind.

"Later, I'll take charge of throwing you a welcome party. Though it's the middle of the night now… Hey, how about this. I'll get lao-Wu to take you inside to find Wang Zheng, our head of HR, and ask her to complete all your onboarding procedures. Then you can go home and rest for the day. Come back and report tomorrow morning, okay?"

Guo Changcheng nodded hastily.

For all that Director Zhao had been burning with impatience before, at this moment, as they stood there and talked, his speech was unhurried. It didn't make his conversation partner feel iced out or dismissed. He was clearly very smooth when it came to dealing with people.

"Sorry, there's something urgent I need to take care of, so I have to head off. If there's anything you need, just come find me directly. Don't be shy. From now on, we're all family. Sorry for the trouble you took to make the trip today!" Director Zhao smiled apologetically at Guo Changcheng, then waved at lao-Wu before rushing off.

Lao-Wu had to be a loyal fan of Director Zhao. Even though he'd just listened to a round of empty bullshit that had nothing to do with him, he was as happy as a clam. As he led Guo Changcheng into the office building, he went on and on, "Our Director Zhao is young and capable, has an even temperament, and doesn't ever throw his authority around with anyone or in any situation…"

Guo Changcheng, still fear-struck from the misfortune of meeting his boss, was too scattered to pay proper attention as he listened. Like an echo bug,[1] he could only

nod agreeably.

Because Guo Changcheng had always been too afraid to look people in the eye, he completely failed to notice that old Mr. Wu, who was leading the way, was as white as a sheet under the lights. His lips were bloodred, the corners of his mouth extended all the way to his ears, and as his mouth opened and closed, one could see that he was missing a tongue.

Inside the office building, people were coming and going, and they all looked extraordinarily busy.

At this point, the weirdness of the situation finally began to properly dawn on Guo Changcheng. Ordinarily, even if an urgent matter required working overtime until midnight, would the staff of the gatehouse and HR department need to keep them company?

Beside him, lao-Wu explained quietly, “Xiao-Guo, don’t get the wrong idea. In the future, as long as there aren’t any major cases, you’ll mostly be working during the day. It’s just these couple of days out of the year during the seventh lunar month when we’re so busy that night and day tend to blur together. You get something to show for it, though! Overtime pay is three times your usual, and your monthly bonus will be double too.”

Guo Changcheng was even more baffled. What was this stuff about “the seventh lunar month is so busy” supposed to mean? Did criminals have mid-year summary meetings and experience exchange conferences too? Following the *lunar* calendar?

But fear of coming across as stupid made him too embarrassed to ask. He just nodded, confused. “Mm.”

Lao-Wu continued, “I usually work the night shift. We have a different colleague in the gatehouse during the day. You probably won’t see me that often in the future.” He sighed. “The truth is, I’m happy to spend time with you young people. Did you just graduate? From which school? What were you studying?”

Guo Changcheng described his unimpressive academic background, ashamed. At the end, in a voice as thin as a mosquito’s buzz, he added, “I’m not very good at studying.”

“Aiya, what do you mean?! You’re a university student!” Lao-Wu hurriedly continued, “I just love cultured young people. I’d never be able to do it. When I was younger, my family was poor. When I was seven or eight, I attended a sishu with the xiansheng[2] in the village for a few years. All these years later, I’ve pretty much given everything I’ve learned back to that xiansheng. I can’t even read most characters; I can barely read the newspaper.”

What year was this? A sishu?

Once again, Guo Changcheng didn’t understand, but he was still afraid of seeming stupid, and embarrassment kept him silent.

Happily, lao-Wu said, “Here we are!”

Guo Changcheng looked up to see “Department of Human Resources” in large text on the door, written in red on a white background. The red struck him as off somehow, but he had trouble putting a finger on why. After giving the words a long stare, it suddenly clicked: that rusty red was the color of dried blood!

Standing beside Guo Changcheng, lao-Wu knocked on the door. “Is xiao-Wang here? I brought a new comrade who’ll be joining us. Can we bother you for a second to complete the onboarding process?”

After a beat of silence, an airy, female voice came from inside. “Mm, coming.”

The voice seemed awfully distant, but also as if it was floating right by his ear. When Guo Changcheng heard it, he shivered reflexively. A chill brushed the nape of his neck.

But lao-Wu, seemingly oblivious, chattered on. “I’m so sorry, xiao-Guo, making you come all this way in the middle of the night. But there’s no helping it—our xiao-Wang is just like me. We can only work the night shift, so all the new employment procedures need to be done at this time.”

Wait…

What did he mean they could *only* work the night shift?

Why couldn’t they work during the day…?

A fresh layer of icy sweat gushed out of Guo Changcheng’s back. Trembling with fright, he finally steeled his nerves and swept his eyes across the passing employees. With a single glance, he saw a person wearing a uniform float past him, his feet unmistakably not touching the ground…

Or rather…he…h-h-he didn’t *have* feet!

The door to the office creaked open in front of them, the hinges emitting a hoarse moan. A young woman in a white dress appeared. In a wisp of a voice that made Guo Changcheng erupt in goosebumps, she said, “Did you bring your letter of acceptance and your ID?”

Cold, gloomy wind billowed out from the office. Guo Changcheng’s heart felt like it was suspended in his throat, no longer beating. He held his breath and looked up slowly. His gaze slid across the white dress, unsullied by even a single speck of dust, and finally landed on the girl’s bare neck…

A gurgling noise rose from Guo Changcheng’s throat as if he were being choked. Mouth agape, eyes so wide that they threatened to fall out, he took a step back. Fear coursed through him.

Upon closer inspection, he saw what looked like a red thread around the woman’s neck. But it was no accessory—it lay too close to her skin… Rather, it was a tight line of stitches that held her head to her neck!

A frigid hand came to rest on his shoulder. From right by his ear, lao-Wu’s voice said, “Hey, xiao-Guo, what’s wrong?”

Guo Changcheng whipped his head around to stare directly at lao-Wu’s face—a face that looked as if it were made from papier-mâché, with a large, bloody mouth that reached his ears.

Earlier, Guo Changcheng had foolishly thought that meeting his boss would be worse than meeting a ghost, and now he was suffering the consequences of his words. Tonight he’d not only met his boss—he’d met some real ghosts!

His dear uncle truly had found him just the loveliest, most extraordinary job.

ARC 1

REINCARNATION DIAL

Chapter 1

THE STREETLIGHTS were no brighter than fireflies. They did little to illuminate the night through which a girl fled, darting across the uneven cobblestones. She suddenly tripped and fell, knees slamming into the ground.

Fingers twisting nervously in her shirt, Li Qian gasped for air. The summer night was so humid that it was like trying to breathe inside a steamer basket. All she could hear was the thunder of her own heart and the sound of approaching footsteps.

That rustling could only come from old soft-soled fabric shoes. There was a sluggishness to the steps, a shuffling that suggested an elderly person whose legs were no longer what they'd once been.

She whipped her head around, but other than tiny bugs flitting randomly under the light, there was nothing behind her.

Li Qian was a pretty girl with delicate features, but at the moment her hair was a mess; much of it had come loose and was plastered to her skin with sweat. Her lips were as pale as her face. No one could be beautiful under the circumstances, not even her. Her expression slowly contorted into something strange—a look of fear, or perhaps resentment.

She leapt up. "Don't even *think* of following me!" Teeth gritted, she snarled, "I shook you off once, and I can do it again."

The footsteps stopped.

Li Qian rolled up her sleeves. Her pale arms prickled with goosebumps despite the summer heat and humidity, as if she was chilled by something invisible. She snatched up a brick from the ground. The inescapable sound of the footsteps all around her felt like rot spreading through her bones.

There could be nothing more petrifying than seeing *nothing*.

Li Qian started screaming, flailing the brick around in a panic. It grew heavier and heavier, its rough surface rubbing her palm raw. Exhaustion spread black spots across her vision. Gasping, she bent over, leaning her weight on her knees. Her gaze drifted to the ground.

Her pupils immediately contracted, and her whole body began to shake. The brick dropped from her hand onto her toes, exposed in her sandals, but she seemed not to notice. With great effort, she backed up a few steps, then sat down hard as her legs gave out.

The shadow… The shadow!

She was right in front of the streetlamp. How could there be such a clear shadow in the pool of light it cast?

It was like a splash of ink on the ground. Who knew how long it had been there, watching her?

Li Qian lay paralyzed, but the shadow remained upright.

Are you guilty? If not, why are you afraid of the shadow?

She thought she heard a sharp laugh.

Early in the morning, before 5 a.m., the phone on the bedside table rang as if trying to wake the dead.

Zhao Yunlan had worked all night. After getting home, he hadn't even undressed, just rolled straight into bed. It felt as if he'd barely drifted off before being dragged back to consciousness. Expressionless, he opened his eyes; his heavy lids accentuated them, making his double eyelids even more pronounced. He stared at the ceiling with something like hate.

Three seconds later, like a corpse reanimated, he finally lurched upright. His head felt like it was full of glue, but he managed to grab his phone from the bedside table.

To say Zhao Yunlan's apartment was as messy as a doghouse would be a grave insult to dogs everywhere. Clothes were strewn all over the bed and floor; it was impossible to tell whether he planned to wash or wear them. All manner of junk was piled on the queen-sized bed, some of it almost beyond human imagination. The lone sock draped over the corner of a laptop was one thing, and the presence of sunglasses and an umbrella wasn't wholly bizarre, but it would be a stretch to explain the tall hat folded from white paper or the huge jug of cinnabar powder.[3]

All of this clutter had been pushed into a heap, leaving only a nest big enough for one person to lie in—and he'd probably dug out that space just before lying down.

Zhao Yunlan answered the call, looking ready to unleash a torrent of abuse. "What now?"

On the other end of the line, Wang Zheng got right to the point. "Director Zhao, there's been a death."

"When?"

"Last night or early this morning."

"Where?"

"University Street."

"Mm…" Zhao Yunlan rubbed his face, expression savage. "Send lao-Chu to check it out."

"Chu Shuzhi went to Xiangxi for a work trip."

"What about Lin Jing?"

"He was lent to the Netherworld."

"Then Zhu Hong—no, scratch that. It was the full moon yesterday, so she asked for leave. Who's left?"

"Me," Wang Zheng said. "But it's nearly sunrise, so my shift is ending soon. Otherwise, there's Daqing and the new intern, Guo Changcheng."

Zhao Yunlan yawned and said, listlessly, "Have Daqing go with the intern to take a look. Let the kid get his feet wet."

Almost inflectionless, Wang Zheng said, "Intern Guo Changcheng can't go anywhere just now. When he came to report last night, he passed out from terror. He may simply be asleep now, rather than unconscious, but regardless, he still hasn't woken up."

Zhao Yunlan paused at that. Then he asked, “What scared him into passing out?”

“Lao-Wu and I.” Wang Zheng gave a scrupulous report, concluding with, “I told you ages ago to have a professional funeral store make lao-Wu a proper body. Zhu Hong’s hands are clumsier than her feet. Even the beanbags she sews leak everywhere. No papier-mâché person she makes will ever pass for human.”

Zhao Yunlan sat silently on the edge of his bed. Recognizing his lack of available minions, all he could do was sigh sleepily. “All righty, I’ll be there shortly for a look. Tell Daqing to wait for me.”

After hanging up, he yelled in frustration, swore, then took three minutes to wash up before speeding toward University Street.

As Zhao Yunlan passed through the intersection and decelerated, a black shadow descended from the sky. Like a grenade, a round animal slammed into the hood of his car, nearly denting it. The metal clanged with the impact.

Zhao Yunlan immediately stomped on the brakes, sucking a sharp breath through his teeth. He stuck his head out the window. “This is a motor vehicle, sir, not your litter box! Could you please take it easy?”

Perched on the hood was an utterly black cat. Atop the mere suggestion of a neck was a face like a persimmon; his body was a perfect sphere. With great effort, he sucked in his belly while folding his hind legs beneath him. Only after overcoming those challenges could he extend his front legs—short compared to his round belly—and assume a dignified sitting pose.

This big kitty with his persimmon face took a quick look all around. Seeing no one nearby, his whiskers quivered as he slowly opened his mouth. A rather deep male voice emerged. “Cut the bullshit and get out here. Can’t you smell it?”

The smell in the air was indeed unspeakably disgusting. Zhao Yunlan parked on the side of the road and got out, then immediately covered his nose. Brow furrowed, he asked, “What is this stink?! Did you let one loose?”

The massive black cat ignored him and jumped down, hitting the ground with the force of a thunderbolt. Wiggling his butt directly at Zhao Yunlan, he prowled on ahead, radiating majesty and confidence.

Quite a few police cars were already parked on the other side of the road. Caution tape had been slapped across the entrance of a narrow alley.

Rummaging in his pocket, Zhao Yunlan finally found a tattered work ID. The young officer by the caution tape had his back to the crime scene, looking green around the gills. He took the ID and barely glanced at it before shoving it against Zhao Yunlan’s chest and making a dash for the wall. He leaned against it and threw up, unable to bear it anymore.

Zhao Yunlan grasped at his bird’s-nest hair, which looked like a horde of animals had stampeded through it. “Is my beautiful ID photo that revolting?”

The black cat had gone a few steps ahead. Seeing Zhao Yunlan dilly-dallying, he had to turn back, giving him a long meow. His fur stood on end.

“Okay, okay, okay, don’t rush me. Aiya, this smell could kill you from ten paces.” Zhao Yunlan ducked under the caution tape.

As soon as he was on the other side, someone hurried over to greet them. Voice muffled by the tissue clamped over his nose, he asked, “Are you the comrade from the Special Investigations Department?”

Within the Public Security System was a mysterious department called the Special Investigations Department. It was no low-level division, but no one knew exactly what those people did or what their procedures were. The simple fact was, whenever someone from the Special Investigations Department showed up, it meant the order had come directly from above and there was no room for argument.

But if they *didn’t* come, there was no way to find them.

They were within the Public Security System, but in many ways independent from it. The organization was very secretive, with no transparency as to what they did or why. Without special permission, the media couldn’t even catch a glimpse of the SID, never mind get close enough to interview them. No one knew what their criminal procedures were or how they built their indictments. The only thing that was clear was that once a case was handed to them, it vanished into a black box.

Nothing was shared with the public but the case’s conclusion, shrouded in mystery—and sometimes the staff of the SID were even more mysterious than the work they did.

Their case reports were comprehensive, detailing the cause, the course of events, the conclusion, the suspect’s identity, and the circumstances that led to apprehending the perpetrators. Every step they’d taken was plainly laid out with meticulous logic and clear formatting. There was no fault to be found.

The only problem was that by the time any given case was closed, the culprits were all dead.

The officer in charge at this particular crime scene was an older man by the name of Yang. He shook Zhao Yunlan’s hand, curiously looking him up and down. “What do I call you?” he asked politely.

“My name’s Zhao—Zhao Yunlan. Please, just call me xiao-Zhao.”

This was a shock for lao-Yang, who had certainly not expected the current SID director to make an appearance. Director Zhao looked to be about thirty years old, which was a little young for the job. He was tall, lean, and very good looking. But his shirt was wrinkled, its top two buttons undone and only half of the hem tucked into his pants. Between that and the veritable bird’s nest on his head, he was rather unkempt.

Lao-Yang exclaimed, “Aiyou! You’re Director Zhao! Wh-why, I should have realized. I just didn’t expect such a young, promising leader!”

Zhao Yunlan, accustomed to this reaction, smoothly offered a few pleasantries in return.

At the sound of a “meow,” lao-Yang looked down, barely in time to see a dark shadow race up to Zhao Yunlan’s shoulders via his pant leg. It was a black cat with deep green eyes. A green-eyed black cat materializing at a murder scene should have been extremely creepy, but this potentially creepy cat bro was so plump that he seemed more like a lucky cat beckoning fortune in.

The overall effect was that Director Zhao's head seemed on the verge of being pushed off his shoulders, which gave the cat a bit of a comical air.

Lao-Yang and the cat stared at each other for some time. "This… This is…"

Zhao Yunlan awkwardly hiked up his pants, which had nearly been dragged down by the cat's weight. Tilting his head, he laughed dryly. "This is our Director Kitty. Ordinarily, he supervises our work very closely, and since he saw us goofing off and chatting, he's unhappy now."

"…"

Lao-Yang was at a loss.

The black cat meowed smugly, his long tail swishing impatiently. When he lifted his head, Zhao Yunlan immediately understood. He grasped a little tag from around the cat's neck and worked it free from the rolls of fat to show lao-Yang. "This is a special permit from the SID. It's exactly like our work ID, giving him access to any crime scene. Don't worry, he's an old cat. He won't cause any trouble."

Still silent, lao-Yang was starting to think there was bullshit afoot.

After lao-Yang made a round of calls confirming that the man with the bird's-nest head and the cat weren't frauds, Zhao Yunlan and his master cat finally entered the crime scene.

The closer they got, the thicker the stench became.

A girl's corpse lay inside the narrow alley, wearing a shirt that said "Dragon City University Orientation." Her eyes were wide and unfocused, her limbs were splayed out, and her mouth was agape. Her abdomen had been sliced open by a sharp implement and the organs had been removed, leaving her like a big doll with its stuffing pulled out.

Lao-Yang had the tissue back over his nose, his features twisted.

The fat cat on Zhao Yunlan's shoulder uttered a long yowl, jumped to the ground, and circled the corpse twice. He then stopped at a spot and sat, looking up at Zhao Yunlan. He seemed almost as well trained as a drug dog. Zhao Yunlan walked over, putting on wrinkled gloves pulled from his pants pocket. He felt around the area where the cat sat, then carefully lifted one of the corpse's arms.

Lao-Yang craned his neck. On the ground, where it had been hidden by the arm, was half a bloody handprint.

The handprint was starkly inhuman. The palm was as small as a child's, but the fingers were at least twenty centimeters long. Lao-Yang, a lifelong officer, had never seen such a thing. As he stared in shock, he heard Zhao Yunlan say in an unusually serious voice, "As of now, the Special Investigations Department is taking charge of this case. Follow-up procedures will be completed within two business days."

Before lao-Yang could answer, Zhao Yunlan pointed at a small, dilapidated door on the wall next to them. "And what might this be?"

Chapter 2

THIS WAS A SIDE DOOR on Dragon City University's perimeter wall.

Dragon City University was a renowned institution with a long history. Like many other schools, DCU had relocated its main campus to the city's outskirts. Within the city proper, where land was worth more than gold, only a fraction of the administration offices and a few graduate departments remained on the old campus. As a result, the few students there were outnumbered by tourists.

Zhao Yunlan had been standing at the entrance to a dorm building holding the black cat for half an hour when Guo Changcheng finally arrived. That was when Zhao Yunlan began to realize that the intern he had so hastily greeted the night before was a useless embarrassment. Guo Changcheng shrank into himself when he walked, shoulders hunched; his head was always down as if he was ashamed, and his hair nearly covered his eyes. All of this, along with his funereal, all-black attire, made him seem lethargic. He resembled nothing so much as a mushroom swaying in the breeze.

Narrowing his eyes, Zhao Yunlan whispered to the cat in his arms, "What do you think Wang Zheng said to him? You'd think he'd been forced into a life of crime."

The black cat yawned lazily. "Mama Zhao, you're exaggerating."

Guo Changcheng shuffled up to them, for all the world as if he'd been kidnapped and dragged into the mountains to be a bandit's bride. On the verge of tears, he mumbled, "…told me to meet you at the crime scene."

Very deliberately, Zhao Yunlan asked, "Sorry, who did you say sent you? Can you speak up, or do we need to get you a microphone?"

Guo Changcheng shuddered violently. "W-W-Wang, Wang—"[4]

"Meow," Daqing put in.

Disappointment darkened Zhao Yunlan's mood. The previous night he'd brushed past Guo Changcheng without registering that his new employee could barely string a sentence together.

He went through the motions in a tone that didn't quite sound sincere. "You already know what we saw at the crime scene, right? This is the dorm the victim lived in. Come with me and we'll take a look."

He turned and entered the dorm as he spoke but didn't hear anyone coming in behind him. Looking back, he saw that Guo Changcheng's eyes had locked on to the fierce-looking auntie who oversaw the dorm; fear had struck Guo Changcheng silent and rooted him in place. Zhao Yunlan could only rein in his temper and gesture patiently, as if calling to a dog. "Why are you standing at the door like an idiot? I already spoke to her. You don't need to announce yourself. Just come in."

It would've been better if he'd kept his mouth shut. As soon as Guo Changcheng heard, he reflexively straightened up and announced himself, "I-I'm here!" Then, realizing he'd made a fool of himself, he went completely stiff; he became a blushing plank in the entryway.

This time, Zhao Yunlan bit his tongue. His first impression of the intern could best be summed up as "What a dumbass."

Inside the girls' dorm, room 202 was a standard double. The black cat jumped down from Zhao Yunlan's arms and carefully inspected under the bed and cabinet, then leaped to the windowsill, where he lowered his head and sniffed. Suddenly, he turned his head and sneezed heavily.

Guo Changcheng had suffered a great scare the night before, but now, after some observation, he had confirmed that his attractive boss did in fact throw a shadow in daylight. Mustering up the courage to study Zhao Yunlan more closely, he concluded that, although the overnight shift had done a number on Zhao Yunlan's appearance, he might be genuinely human. Thus reassured, he finally relaxed a little and stuck close to his boss's heels, like a little tail.

Zhao Yunlan reached into the box of cigarettes in his pocket and took one with the ease of long practice. Putting it between his lips, he lit it, then went to the window and patted the cat's backside in a signal to move over. Bending toward the windowsill, he squinted and exhaled a puff of smoke.

The smoke's smell wasn't pungent. It held a note of mint and a refreshing herbal scent, and combined with his subtle cologne, it had a relaxing effect. It took a special kind of talent to be so ragged and yet so provocative.

"Look," he said. Guo Changcheng obediently looked down. A shudder racked him at the sight of a print on what had been an unmarked windowsill—the handprint of a human skeleton.

Zhao Yunlan leaned closer and sniffed it calmly. "There isn't any stench. Only an old, experienced cat would be able to smell it."

The black cat's mouth opened. "So it wasn't this?"

Suddenly hearing the cat speak, Guo Changcheng whipped his head around hard enough that his neck cracked.

Zhao Yunlan shook his head within the smoke, looking pensive. Disregarding Guo Changcheng entirely, he turned to the cat and said, "I'm afraid not. Things that can kill don't smell like this."

As he pushed the window open, his gaze inadvertently fell on Guo Changcheng, who was so pale that he seemed like he might drift away. It was clear that his entire view of the world had been toppled and his nerves were tying themselves in a bow. Zhao Yunlan couldn't help wanting to mess with him. "Okay, kid, get up there and see what's outside the window."

"Um…" Guo Changcheng replied.

"What do you mean, 'um'? Smarten up, young man! Hurry!"

Guo Changcheng swallowed hard. He stuck his head out and realized just how high up the second floor was, and his knees went weak. But the thought of turning to Zhao Yunlan and saying "I'm too scared" was clearly even further beyond his courage and communication ability.

Ultimately, the poor child was caught between a rock and a hard place. His boss was more frightening, so he could only climb onto the balcony window, slow as a snail. There he crouched, too afraid to stand up, clutching the lattice as if his life depended on it. Immobilized by fear, he found he could only move his neck. He turned his head with great effort, trembling as he surveyed his surroundings.

Just then, far too clearly, he saw a reflection in the window. Instantly, every hair on his body stood on end. Terrified and panicked, he realized that the glass

wasn't only reflecting *him*!

Impossibly, a skeleton lay where he was crouched. The bones of its hand went straight through his ankle, lined up exactly with the handprint on the windowsill, and it was peering into the room.

Guo Changcheng quickly looked down, but there was nothing there!

For a time, he couldn't tell whether his vision or the window was lying to him. His chest went cold. Even his breathing trembled. Then the skeleton turned, meeting his gaze in the glass…and in the skull's empty eye sockets, Guo Changcheng saw what seemed to be a person.

The person's head and body were covered by a cloak and wholly shrouded in black mist, and there was something in their hand…

Before he could get a good look at what the person was holding, a man spoke from below. "Hey, are you a student?! What are you doing hanging out the window?"

The voice badly startled Guo Changcheng, whose nerves were already shot. In a stroke of misfortune, there was a bit of slippery moss on the windowsill; he lost his footing and fell victim to gravity. Zhao Yunlan leaped into action and made a grab for him but only managed to catch a fistful of Guo Changcheng's helmet-like hair. Guo Changcheng screamed. In shock, Zhao Yunlan lost his grip and just let him drop.

The black cat sat on the windowsill, tail a-swish. "Meow—"

Director Zhao cursed as he raced down the stairs. "I can't fucking believe this."

Seeing Guo Changcheng falling, the person who'd spoken up made a hurried attempt to catch him. He was a man with a lean build who, even at the height of summer, was wearing a long-sleeved shirt. He looked clean cut and gentle with rimless glasses that contributed to an elegant, intellectual air. He'd been holding his lesson planner but had dropped it when he reached for Guo Changcheng.

"Are you all right, Tongxue?"[5]

Thankfully, having only fallen from the second floor, Guo Changcheng was fine, if a bit shaken. Panicked, he turned to look at the windowsill he'd fallen from, only to find it completely empty. It was as if the skeleton hanging outside the window and the black-cloaked figure in its eyes were figments of his imagination.

Legs turning to jelly, Guo Changcheng plopped onto his backside.

"Did you twist your ankle?" The bespectacled man bent down slightly to check on him. "School rules strictly forbid climbing on buildings. It's too dangerous. Now, I won't give you any demerits this time. Let me take you to the school clinic?"

Guo Changcheng replied, "N-no need, I'm n-n-not…"

Nervousness always left him tongue-tied, even less able to speak clearly than usual. He felt that he'd probably been born a useless lump of wood. What path could he take through life that didn't require leeching off a partner? Here he was, first day on the job and already losing his mind.

Zhao Yunlan, having bolted down to the ground floor, grabbed Guo Changcheng by the collar and yanked him upright. What he really wanted was to take off his shoes and dual wield at this precious boy's face, but with someone else present, he could only swallow his temper. He turned to the man in the glasses and extended a hand. "Hello, we're from Public Security. The last name's Zhao. And with whom do I have the honor of speaking?"

Their gazes met, and they both froze.

Out of nowhere, *Is he an instructor or the school hottie?* flashed across Zhao Yunlan's mind.

Something flickered over the hot…instructor's…face. He seemed to instinctively avoid Zhao Yunlan's hand but quickly recovered. Clearing his throat, he touched his hand to Zhao Yunlan's for the merest fleeting instant before letting go. "The honor is all mine. The name is Shen—Shen Wei. I teach here. I'm sorry, I mistook that officer for a student staying behind for the summer."

Shen Wei's hand had the chill of a corpse fresh from cold storage. Zhao Yunlan couldn't help giving him another glance, but Shen Wei refused any eye contact, using the excuse of picking up his scattered lesson plans to avoid his gaze. Zhao Yunlan began to help, and the two of them reached for the same piece of paper at the same time.

Under the circumstances—one of them reaching for his own paper, the other simply trying to help—Zhao Yunlan should have been the one to withdraw. Instead, it was Shen Wei who hastily pulled back, as if burned. His lips were pale, but a trace of crimson tinted his cheekbones.

His entire reaction was peculiar for a first meeting. It was as if he feared Zhao Yunlan, but it was more than that. If a criminal with a guilty conscience came face-to-face with a police officer, in addition to being nervous, they would try to sneak peeks at the officer's reaction rather than fully avoiding their eyes.

It was all rather baffling. Zhao Yunlan started to observe Shen Wei carefully.

The world held all kinds of beauties. Sunny, refreshing, dashing, delicate—the possibilities were endless. But there was one type, like fine porcelain, that at first glance seemed pleasant enough to look at, but not entrancing. Such gentle, elegant beauty didn't brashly demand attention, but someone with a discerning eye would be drawn in, captivated by the exquisiteness before them.

That was the nature of Shen Wei's appearance. The longer you looked, the more his beauty was revealed.

Zhao Yunlan had no preference between men or women, and what's more, he'd been single for a few months. His suspicious gaze changed as lust crept in. His heart, despite the inappropriate timing, skipped a beat.

Just then, the massive spherical black cat wriggled his way over to Shen Wei's feet. It almost seemed like he was under the influence—after sniffing Shen Wei carefully, neck extended, the cat glued himself to Shen Wei's leg, meowing piteously. This lordly cat, normally gluttonous and lazy, noble and cold, had never carried out his obligations as a cat so earnestly before. Zhao Yunlan froze at the sight of him shamelessly nuzzling into Shen Wei's pant leg. Daqing even looked up, as if kissing up to Shen Wei, and stretched his laughably short front legs toward Shen Wei's knees, begging to be held.

He picked up the cat, who didn't mind the chill of his touch. With a softer meow, the cat curled into a ball, purring and nuzzling against Shen Wei's hands.

Shen Wei petted the cat's head. "What an intelligent cat. Does he have a name?"

"Yeah," Zhao Yunlan said. "His name is Daqing. Pet name: Fatty. Nickname: Big Dumb Fatty."

The black cat yowled, fur standing on end as he scratched at Zhao Yunlan. Zhao Yunlan easily evaded his claws and scooped the cat into his own arms, giving Guo Changcheng a look.

Guo Changcheng steeled himself and approached. Opening the document folder he held, he withdrew a female student's ID, trembling as he passed it to Shen Wei. Speaking to a stranger was intensely difficult for him, but he said, "Sh-Shen-laoshi, h-hello. Could you take a look? Does this person look familiar?"

Shen Wei pushed his glasses up, masking the faintest trace of panic and smoothing out his expression. "I don't know her. I don't think she's taken any of my classes. So the rumors that something happened to a student last night are true?"

Zhao Yunlan studied him, alert to every microexpression. "Yes. This ID was found on the deceased. Where can we find more background information on this student, Shen-laoshi?"

Shen Wei avoided his demanding gaze. "You can try asking at the registrar."

"Where might the registrar be?" asked Zhao Yunlan immediately. "Would you be so kind as to take us there?" Shen Wei stiffened, but Zhao Yunlan pressed on. "Or is it too much trouble?"

Tightening his grip on his lesson plans, Shen Wei paused. Finally, he reluctantly said, "Follow me."

Chapter 3

DRAGON CITY UNIVERSITY'S original campus had been built during the Chinese Republican era, and it bore the weight of a century of history. There were ancient trees everywhere you looked, creating a canopy that practically blotted out the sky. The architecture of the school buildings hidden within dated back to the days of European Concession; they seemed incredibly old and somehow desolate. Only the administrative office buildings near the west entrance had been built in recent years. They were tall enough to stand out among the older buildings—a sore thumb that ruined the ambiance of the campus.

As soon as they entered this brand-new admin building, Zhao Yunlan's eyelid twitched reflexively. The building had eighteen floors.[6]

There had been a time when some real estate developers avoided the number eighteen when numbering floors for residential buildings. But as housing prices skyrocketed and the market boomed, no one could afford to care about that kind of superstition anymore.

A cold, eerie draft came from up ahead. It might have just been the air conditioning. From his place on Zhao Yunlan's shoulder, Daqing shivered, sharp claws unsheathed and hooked firmly into Zhao Yunlan's shirt.

Once on the elevator, Shen Wei said, "That student's ID said she was in the math department. Their faculty office is on the top floor." He pressed the button for the eighteenth floor.

Out of nowhere, Zhao Yunlan asked, "Shen-laoshi, are you not curious about what happened? Most people have a few questions when they stumble into something like this."

Shen Wei lowered his head slightly. "It's the victim who's important here," he murmured. "I'm just doing what I can to help you investigate. As for the rest of it, what matters is that you know about it. Whether I know or not isn't important."

Zhao Yunlan touched the cat's back, absentmindedly stroking the black fur. "Not many citizens are so willing to cooperate with our work these days. Our Daqing never gets close to strangers, but he took a real shine to you."

Shen Wei smiled. He spoke sparingly, as if every word were as precious as gold. "Anyone would do the same."

Just then, as the elevator reached the fourth floor,[7] it suddenly shook and jolted to a halt. The overhead lights flickered twice, perhaps due to faulty wiring. Panicked, Guo Changcheng looked up at Zhao Yunlan, but the man seemed oblivious; he didn't even blink, just continued to study Shen Wei, deep in thought.

A man's voice came faintly from the intercom. "Shen-laoshi, what takes you to the eighteenth floor?"

Shen Wei's expression remained unchanged. "There's been an accident involving a girl from the math department. These two are police. I'm taking them up to the math department to gain a better understanding of the situation."

"Oh." The person speaking seemed slow to react. There was a pause before they continued, voice weak and sluggish. "Okay. Please be careful."

He'd just finished speaking when everything returned to normal. The lights steadied, and the halted elevator continued upward with a creak, as if nothing at all had happened.

"Scared?" Shen Wei turned around, still only looking at Guo Changcheng while surreptitiously avoiding Zhao Yunlan. "That was probably the building security guard. Last semester, a student died by suicide, jumping from the roof. Since then, if anyone not from the math department wants to go to the top floor, the security guard stops the elevator and asks a few questions to keep such a thing from happening again."

Guo Changcheng released the breath he was holding, looking faintly nauseated; Zhao Yunlan, however, gave the intercom a considering glance.

The elevator reached its destination, shaking the whole way. The eighteenth floor was desolate, with not even a mosquito or gecko present to provide a spark of life.

Zhao Yunlan couldn't help but sneeze a few times.

Shen Wei immediately stopped. "Officer Zhao, do you have a cold?"

There was a kind of gentlemanly righteousness to the way Shen Wei lowered his head. Just looking at him was so pleasant that it was nearly impossible to suspect him of anything.

Rubbing his nose, Zhao Yunlan said, "No, no. It's just that I took one step into this hall and smelled the miserable scent of math homework. Allergies, you know?"

Shen Wei's eyes crinkled politely at the joke.

"Don't laugh," Zhao Yunlan said seriously. "Not that I'm afraid of you laughing. When I was a student, teachers were my mortal enemies. One homeroom teacher confidently predicted that I'd grow up to be a little thug. No one ever would've imagined that I'd become a cop. But when I ran into him at a school anniversary and wanted to show off a little, guess what he said?"

"What?" Shen Wei was looking down, watching where he was going, but somehow his side profile gave the strong impression he was listening attentively.

Zhao Yunlan quipped, "That old cynic said, 'You think I was wrong, Zhao-tongxue? Look at you now—a typical thug in a uniform."

Zhao Yunlan was used to dealing with all manner of people. He was chatty and articulate, with a silver tongue, and now he quickly dispelled the awkward atmosphere. As the trio walked on, Zhao Yunlan and Shen Wei continued chatting, still subtly probing each other for information. The echoes of their steps rang off the walls. But hidden beneath the sound of their voices and casual laughter was another noise: the footsteps of a fourth person.

Quiet steps dragged along the floor, rustling like the soft fabric shoes of an elderly person.

The administrative building was constructed in a tower style. As with most such structures, an elevator stood at its center, encircled by the floors' hallways.

Guo Changcheng couldn't help noticing that Zhao Yunlan's watch was silently changing in a peculiar way. Color was spreading from its center, where the hour and minute hands met: a smudge of crimson, darker than vermilion but lighter than ruby,

expanded across the watch's face like ripples on water. This metamorphosis made Zhao Yunlan's watch seem like an expensive piece of art. The metal straps buckled around his slim, pale wrist gave a strangely uncanny impression of luxury.

Guo Changcheng hesitated. In a small voice, he said, "Director… Director Zhao, your watch…"

"What? Is it turning red?" Zhao Yunlan, who was walking ahead, turned back with his signature smirk. "Know why?"

Guo Changcheng shook his head in total honesty.

Still smiling, Zhao Yunlan said, "Violent ghosts like to wear red. This building's feng shui isn't very good. Something filthy could be hiding just about anywhere. Maybe that's what's being reflected."

Guo Changcheng paled as he glanced reflexively at Zhao Yunlan's watch. This time, the glass showed him a person: an old woman of average build, maybe a bit plump, dressed entirely in black…and looking expressionlessly back at him!

Guo Changcheng's footsteps stopped abruptly.

But Zhao Yunlan only laughed, as if he hadn't noticed a thing. He twisted a small knob on the side of his watch, and a cloud of mist erupted within, washing the redness away in a heartbeat. When he looked again, he saw a clean men's watch of very ordinary design. Its display showed no trace of either creepy red or reflected female ghosts.

"Haven't you seen those balls under computer mouses that can change color? Same principle. This silly kid—you can tell him anything and he'll buy it." Zhao Yunlan abruptly stopped teasing and turned to Shen Wei. "Shen-laoshi is an intellectual who believes in atheism. I'm sure *you* don't believe in ghosts, do you?"

"As the old saying goes, 'Even the most esteemed of scholars does not speak outside the bounds of his knowledge,'" Shen Wei said. "No one can say for certain whether or not ghosts actually exist. Personally, I think that if they exist, then they exist; if they don't, they don't. There's no need to investigate too deeply. 'Ask not of the people, but of ghosts and gods' was only done by incompetent rulers in ancient times. If people can't even figure out their own problems, isn't it an absurd waste of time to wonder whether ghosts and gods exist?"

He spoke in a very scholarly manner, but his answers danced smoothly around the question. Seeing no use in probing further, Zhao Yunlan smiled and moved on as if nothing had happened. "Shen-laoshi, you teach the humanities?"

"Mm. I teach language classes, as well as a few humanities electives."

"Ah, that explains it. You know, I heard from a friend in real estate that residential buildings are rarely built like this anymore. Nowadays, it's usually only commercial office buildings over a hundred meters tall that are built in this tower style. Apart from how hard they are to clean, they don't have open space to allow for natural lighting, so they aren't too comfortable to live in. I think that's the meaning of 'bad feng shui.'"

Zhao Yunlan took his pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket and shook it. "Oh, right—is smoking allowed here? Do you mind?"

Shen Wei shook his head. Zhao Yunlan flicked the pack with one hand, his other hand in his pocket, and fished a cigarette out with his lips. Eyes slightly downcast, he lit it. A few seconds later, he exhaled a cloud of white smoke with the

casual air of an experienced smoker.

Shen Wei had seemed determined not to speak much, but evidently this was a final straw. Brows furrowed, he said, “Smoking and drinking are bad for your health, and Officer Zhao is still so young. It’s best to do such things in moderation.”

Zhao Yunlan smiled but didn’t respond. Hidden by the cloud of smoke, his expression was impossible to make out. Fine ash fell from the cigarette’s tip; intentionally or not, some of it landed on Shen Wei’s shadow. Zhao Yunlan’s gaze swept across the floor, and then he wafted the smoke back toward himself. “In our field, day and night run together sometimes. It’s a bit embarrassing to admit, but that does make it easy to develop bad habits.”

It seemed Shen Wei wanted to say something else, but as the words reached his lips, he bit them back forcefully. When he spoke again, it was on another topic entirely. “There aren’t many departments on the old campus, so there isn’t much faculty presence. On all eighteen floors here, only the south-facing offices are in use. Most of the other rooms are empty. Turn here and you’ll reach your destination.”

Mold and moss liked to grow in lonely, empty corners, but so did other things.

For whatever reason, the looping hallway of the building didn’t have curved corners; instead it had abrupt sharp angles, which were a huge taboo in feng shui. Superstition aside, it was visually jarring, and anyone approaching a turn had no view at all of what was around the corner. If two people happened to be walking toward the same corner from opposite directions, they would be on a collision course.

Shen Wei led the way, Zhao Yunlan followed closely behind, holding the cat, and Guo Changcheng brought up the rear. As they came toward a corner, Guo Changcheng had the sudden feeling that something was about to lash out of those dark shadows. He could no longer pay attention to the conversation, focused only on that corner ahead. There, dim light shone through a window that was open at a very uncomfortable angle. Its lattice shadow spread across the floor in a stark delineation of light and darkness.

At the edge of that shadow, Guo Changcheng noticed something moving, as if a person were hidden there and stealthily poking their head out. And then…a shape like a hand emerged!

The shadow hand’s fingers suddenly splayed wide, making a fierce grab for Shen Wei’s feet.

Shen Wei appeared oblivious, but Zhao Yunlan grabbed his arm and dragged him back half a step.

“Right, I just remembered something,” Zhao Yunlan said, tapping some cigarette ash into the shadow. The shadowy hand recoiled as if burned. “Where is my mind? We got this case in a rush, so I need to speak to the chancellor or their administrative assistant about what the school needs to do to cooperate. Would you be able to help us get in touch?”

Now, finally, Shen Wei looked at him. The corners of the professor’s eyes gently tapered into a line, slender and elegant, like a delicate brushstroke trailing off. The way his gaze slanted out through his glasses verged on seductive, in an otherworldly way.

He could have stepped out of a supernatural tale, like a scholar who stole the heart of a female ghost and whose image she'd lovingly captured in ink. In such stories, even if the subject of the portrait was as clear as the moon and as smooth as jade, this image of them would still inevitably be tainted by the artist's sinful aura.

Shen Wei looked down, smiling shyly. The dark seductiveness had evaporated. "You're right. I really can't be of any help here, and I might even be a hindrance. The offices on the southern wall are all the math department. You can just go in and inquire. I'll go speak to the chancellor."

"Thanks." Zhao Yunlan extended the hand he'd been keeping in his pants pocket and shook Shen Wei's hand with a smile. After an unremarkable goodbye, he waved Guo Changcheng along and strode arrogantly into the office area, intern in tow.

For some reason, after a few steps, Guo Changcheng looked back.

Shen Wei had yet to take even a single step from the spot. He'd removed his glasses and was absentmindedly wiping them with the corner of his shirt. In the dim hallway, his shadow stretched out, long against the floor, looking lonely and dejected. The eyes that had so determinedly avoided Zhao Yunlan were now fixed on his back.

There was a dark distance in that intense gaze. His expression held both a sort of restrained yearning and an affection that was almost palpable…but at the same time, there was deep, crushing pain.

Out of nowhere, Guo Changcheng got the feeling that the man had been standing there for thousands and thousands of years.

Shen Wei watched Zhao Yunlan until he turned the corner, then finally noticed Guo Changcheng looking at him.

A polite smile spread across the young professor's face. He put his glasses back on, as if donning a nonchalant facade. He nodded at Guo Changcheng in acknowledgment, then disappeared into the elevator, as though everything Guo Changcheng had seen was only the misconception of an apprehensive young intern.

"Director Zhao, that man, he…"

"Haven't you realized that, wherever this is, it's not the math department?" Zhao Yunlan interrupted. He reached out to wipe the heavy dust on a windowsill, carelessly rubbing the dust between his fingers. "We're being taken for a ride," he said evenly. "Do you think it's a coincidence? Or did that Shen-laoshi do it on purpose?"

Perhaps because Zhao Yunlan looked relatively young, or perhaps because his attitude had been easygoing and warm the entire time, Guo Changcheng gathered up enough confidence to ask, "Then why did you let him go? If he brought us here on purpose, why…"

With one hand holding his cigarette and the other back in his pocket, Zhao Yunlan turned and looked at Guo Changcheng through the swirling smoke. Guo Changcheng's mouth snapped shut.

"He's an ordinary human—I checked. You're new, so it's okay if you don't understand these things. We'll teach you as you go." Zhao Yunlan's voice lowered. "In this country, we basically have the same authority as our colleagues in other departments. Even without proof, we can interrogate citizens, ask them to cooperate, suspect them, or even lawfully detain them and bring them in for questioning. But

there's one thing above all that: we absolutely do not have the right to keep an ordinary human in a dangerous situation. If anything happened to them, the consequences would be more than anyone could bear."

His tone wasn't harsh—quite the contrary. He was speaking very gently. Perhaps it was the shadowy frigidity of the hallway that made Guo Changcheng shiver.

Zhao Yunlan had already turned away. "As you can probably imagine, the cases that come to us don't often go through the usual public prosecution procedures. Under certain circumstances, we have the right to deal with those particular wrongdoers on the spot. That kind of authority can be a dangerous thing, so there are rules we must abide by. Do you know what the first one is?"

Guo Changcheng shook his head slowly, then realized the other man had his back to him and hadn't seen. He flushed in fresh embarrassment.

"Whether dealing with a human or a ghost, without conclusive proof, you must assume they are innocent." Zhao Yunlan seemed to have eyes on the back of his head. Having answered his own question, he patted the black cat's rump. "And you, Big Dumb Fatty—what was all that earlier? You were sucking up like a stupid dog!"

The black cat swiped rudely at him and jumped out of his arms, then strode aggressively to stand in front of them. "I just think there's something strange about that Shen-laoshi. I'm not sure exactly what it is, but being close to him makes me very comfortable."

"You also feel comfortable when you get close to wandering ghosts, and you especially love hiding dried fish in subterranean caves where corpses were hidden," Zhao Yunlan pointed out icily.

"You know that's exactly what I mean, dumbass human," said the cat disdainfully with a fwip of his tail.

Guo Changcheng had no idea how to respond.

The hallway grew dimmer as they walked, as if they'd entered a dark, endless tunnel. Zhao Yunlan reached for his lighter. It lit with a flick, and the small flame danced restlessly, silently ripping a tiny hole in the boundless darkness. His smile had disappeared. In the firelight, his face had an unhealthy pallor, making him seem tired, but his gaze was intensely focused—darker, in a way, than what surrounded them. A rotting smell came up from the depths of the darkness. Guo Changcheng couldn't help covering his nose.

"I hate circular halls like these," Zhao Yunlan said softly. "I hate everything that circles around and around—life and death, again and again, unending."

Hearing that stretched Guo Changcheng's nerves as far as he could bear. And then there came a cracking sound, one that immediately made him think of the sound of a gun being cocked on TV. Before he could even ask, he felt the sudden sensation of a light exhalation over the back of his neck. He jumped.

"Get out of the way," Zhao Yunlan said, as calm as if he were holding a plate of hot dumplings and asking someone to move over.

Guo Changcheng had already flung himself to the ground, nearly wetting his pants. A gunshot rang out in the darkness. A piercing scream came from behind him. If he'd had fur, it would have been standing up more than Daqing's when someone

touched the cat's butt. His heart beat with such ferocity that it seemed to echo in his chest. It felt as if he'd been terrified into a heart attack.

As he sat on the floor, disheveled, he looked behind him. The weak glow of Zhao Yunlan's lighter showed a shadow on the wall the size of a five- or six-year-old child. At first glance, it might have been ink someone had smeared there. And at the center, in what would be its chest, there was a bullet wound. A pool of crimson was spreading from it in all directions, as if it were capable of bleeding.

"What is that?" Guo Changcheng asked. There was a shrillness to his voice that even he didn't recognize.

"Just a shadow. Don't get worked up over nothing." Zhao Yunlan reached out and wiped at the black shadow. The bloodred substance began to flake off the wall at his touch, like old, damp paint.

"The… The shadow of *what*?"

Zhao Yunlan paused, then snapped his head halfway around with a creepy smile. Guo Changcheng could almost feel his soul being dragged in by the man's frighteningly black eyes. Then, in a bone-chilling whisper, Zhao Yunlan said, "You know, sometimes a person can have more than one shadow."

Without a sound, Guo Changcheng slid down the wall like a limp noodle.

Zhao Yunlan was speechless.

"It's all your fault." Daqing's tail stood straight in the air as he circled the unconscious Guo Changcheng. This poor little intern was adding fainting into his daily routine. The cat flicked his tail unhappily. "What good does scaring him unconscious do?"

"I didn't do it on purpose." Zhao Yunlan kicked Guo Changcheng lightly. The intern slid down further against his leg with absolutely no reaction. "Who knew this fella was sound activated and would faint from a few sentences? I figured at worst he'd piss himself or something."

Daqing was pointedly silent.

"That way, I can pay his bonus with adult diapers." Zhao Yunlan reached down, picked Guo Changcheng up, and threw him over one shoulder. He looked like he was carrying a sack of potatoes that jostled with every step. His movements were nimble, but his tone was acidic. "Tell me, whose relative is this, that he just got shoved under my eyelids? What a pain."

"Apparently an important leader who recently arrived in the ministry is this kid's uncle," Daqing said.

Zhao Yunlan asked, expressionless, "Someone who just arrived? Doesn't he know the Special Investigations Department doesn't answer to the Ministry of Public Security? Sticking some mortal here with me—does he want his nephew to earn the honor of perishing in the line of duty?"

Daqing meowed. "Why didn't you say anything when the order came? What's the point of complaining at me now, you shameless kiss-up?"

"Who cares if I'm shameless? What matters is not dying of hunger." Zhao Yunlan stubbed out the butt of his cigarette, slapping the kitty's head lightly. "Also, those of you who have nothing to do all day but pretend to be high and mighty, ask your conscience this: where do you think your jobs, your pay and bonuses, the benefits during holidays, and even the right to do your work without being affected or

disturbed by any other departments come from? Do you think they were blown in by the wind? Don't I have to go make those connections? What is shame? Can you eat it? Does it taste good?"

Daqing, whose steady diet of imported cat food had gradually given him a more international body type, closed his mouth.

"Besides, as soon as he was assigned, his name was on the Soul-Guarding Order. I thought he'd have some special powers! How was I to know the Soul-Guarding Order is as susceptible to politics as I am?"

The black cat listened as he ran his mouth, but daring to joke about the Soul-Guarding Order was too much. "Enough nonsense!"

The Soul-Guarding Order had existed since ancient times. It served to conduct Netherworld business in the mortal world, act as a medium between yin and yang,[8] and coordinate the Three Realms.[9] Historically, it had fallen under the Imperial History Bureau. After the People's Republic of China was founded, the Soul-Guarding Order came under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Public Security. That was when the Special Investigations Department had been established.

The current director of the Special Investigations Department, Zhao Yunlan, was also the Guardian. This Guardian was equally comfortable in the Netherworld or in banquet halls. He was talented and smooth, able to hold his alcohol and exchange cups with anyone in the Three Realms. Eating, drinking, whoring, gambling, or putting on a show—he was an expert at it all.

The old cat looked on coldly. If Zhao Yunlan hadn't had the dubious fortune of inheriting the Soul-Guarding Order, those skills alone would have been enough to guarantee him a bright and promising future.

"What happened in the hall just now?" Daqing, unable to bite the hand that fed him, could only cough dryly and change the topic. "Why did your Clarity watch sound the alarm like that?"

"There's something following us," Zhao Yunlan said. "But it ran when I shined the light on it. It probably isn't malicious."

"It's not the killer?"

"No. You think I can't tell the difference between a newly formed ghost and something so tremendously evil?" Zhao Yunlan lugged Guo Changcheng as he paced up and down the hallway. "You saw the handprint next to the corpse, right? 'Bones thin as a match, fingers long as a whip.' So far I can't say for sure what it is, but I do know it's not human. This intern sure is solid—he weighs a ton. I have to dump him somewhere."

As he spoke, Zhao Yunlan came to a corner and tossed Guo Changcheng down, but he still had enough conscience to not leave him for dead. Hiking his pants up, he squatted down and took a little bottle from his pocket. After pouring its contents in a circle around Guo Changcheng, he bit his own middle finger and smeared a drop of blood between Guo Changcheng's brows. The moment the blood touched Guo Changcheng's skin, it was completely absorbed. The poor intern's complexion improved at once.

Having done all that, Zhao Yunlan gave Guo Changcheng a fierce smack on the head and cursed under his breath. “Useless thing.”

“Enough fooling around, Yunlan. Look at your watch.”

Zhao Yunlan glanced down just in time to see the face of his watch, Clarity, turn red again. A sharp yowl from beside his feet signaled him to follow Daqing’s gaze.

An old woman clad in her graveclothes stood behind them. For all he knew, she’d been there for some time.

As soon as her eyes met his, she turned to leave. But after only a few steps, she stopped again, as if wanting to lead them somewhere.

“*This* is the new ghost you were talking about? A new ghost out in broad daylight like this?” Daqing extended his stumpy legs and gave chase, meowing in complaint. “Are you blind, you gay fool?”

Zhao Yunlan hurried to catch up. “Fuck off. Can’t you see she can’t speak? Can’t you see there’s still some life to her? Can’t you see she’s walking with two legs, not floating in midair? Who’s the blind one here, Big Dumb Fatty?”

Still bickering, they turned a sharp corner. The old woman disappeared. What she’d led them to was a flight of stairs heading to the roof.

Daqing sniffled and sneezed. “What a massive amount of resentment.”

Bending down to pick him up, Zhao Yunlan said, “Looks like it was her who brought us here, not Shen-laoshi. Maybe he really doesn’t have anything to do with this. Let’s go check it out.”

Carefully, they walked up. The stairs felt soft underfoot, as though made not from cement but from some living thing—or rather, countless “living things” that now reached from the shadows, clawing at whatever dared to enter their territory. But the moment they touched the hem of Zhao Yunlan’s pants, they were thrown back.

“It’s a given that every school is allotted a quota of suicides each year. As long as the number isn’t higher than that, it’s not a huge problem,” Zhao Yunlan said. “But I’ve heard that Dragon City University has had far too many for three years in a row. Most buildings here on the original campus are old and not very tall. Only the newer ones are high enough to guarantee no one can survive hitting the ground, so they’re a magnet for suicides. The other buildings aren’t so bad, but *this* building is where darkness and shadows converge. It’s all corners inside, with lots of large L-shaped rooms and hallways, so once impurities are drawn in, they’re stuck. Since they build up over time, a ton of resentment must be accumulated here.”

They reached the top of the stairs as he finished speaking. The small door to the roof was locked, with only a weak sliver of light managing to filter through. Zhao Yunlan took a transit card from his breast pocket, thrust it into the lock, and gently turned it. The metal door, nearing the end of its life, creaked open. Holding his lighter aloft, Zhao Yunlan slowly walked through.

The roof of the eighteenth floor offered a wide view. Down on one side was Dragon City University’s greenery, like an old-growth forest; on the other was the heavy traffic of cars and people crowding the city’s main street.

At the roof’s edge stood a girl with her back to him.

Zhao Yunlan opened his mouth carefully. “Hey…”

He’d barely begun to speak when she suddenly, with no warning, climbed over the railing and jumped.

Out of sheer reflex, Zhao Yunlan lunged forward to grab her. By anyone’s standards, it was a swift response. He clearly managed to catch the back of her clothes, but his fingers went right through. Then she was gone, as if she’d been nothing but a mirage.

The cat bounced over like a rubber ball. “What is it? Was it human?”

“She was too fast.” Zhao Yunlan subconsciously rubbed his fingers together. “I didn’t have time to figure out whether she was…”

Zhao Yunlan had been born with his third eye open. Since childhood, he’d been able to see ghosts as plainly as he could humans, so a fleeting glance hadn’t been enough to tell him whether she was human or something else. Before the cat could speak again, there were hurried footsteps behind them. Zhao Yunlan turned and recognized the same girl, now walking slowly up to the roof, head down. Her features were too blurred to make out her expression.

This time, her pace quickened before he could get a single word out. She raced to the edge as if trying to beat the lunch rush to the cafeteria and flung herself over. Zhao Yunlan reached out and grabbed her shoulder, but the same thing happened again. His hand passed through her, and she vanished into thin air.

After that, it was like jumping to your death was the latest craze. Girl after girl, each one blurry-faced and rushing as if to get to the market, appeared and then dashed to leap from the roof. Zhao Yunlan made grabs for all of them, but not a single one was corporeal. Beads of sweat began appearing on his forehead.

At first, Daqing was at Zhao Yunlan’s side for each girl, but after the eighth jumper, the cat sat off to the side. His tail swished impatiently behind him, left to right, like a pendulum. “Give it up. These are either earthbound spirits or lingering consciousnesses from suicides here.”

Zhao Yunlan ignored the advice. He was strong in short bursts and had some martial arts training, so beating up the occasional thug wasn’t a problem. But overall, years of poor habits and a lack of exercise meant he wasn’t all that fit. After only a few rounds he was already a bit winded.

The black cat sighed. “One can be fooled once or twice, but not a third time. Eight times now and you still can’t tell she’s not human?”

“How do you know all eight are the same person? Can you *prove* there’s no human here but me? How do you know that when the next one runs out, we’ll still be in the same physical space as we were a moment ago? Will you be able to discern whether or not she’s human the moment she runs out? Remember, the third regulation is ‘Never assume.’ Or did you gobble that one up with your cat food?” Zhao Yunlan gave the cat a stern look.

The black cat, who was often annoying and rude, twitched his tail sheepishly. “Scolding me…?” he muttered. “This old cat’s lived for thousands of years, yet you dare act like a boss and scold me, you brat?”

Zhao Yunlan erupted. “If you don’t shut up, I’m taking away your cat food!”

Daqing was a cat who knew how to pick his battles. His tone changed at once. “Meow—”

Just then, a ninth jumper appeared. As soon as her face was visible, Zhao Yunlan yelled, “Miss, wait!”

But the girl turned a deaf ear. Like all the others before her, she hurled herself toward Mother Earth like an arrow shot from the bow.

“Fuck!” Once again, Zhao Yunlan’s hands closed on nothing. He slapped the icy-cold railing fiercely.

“Mm…” Daqing came closer and rested his front paws on the railing, sniffing carefully. “Actually, what you’re saying makes sense. Some earthbound spirits, like Aunt Xianglin[10] relentlessly repeating her tales of woes, do reenact their deaths over and over again. But they’re usually not in such a rush to die.”

“Then what is it?” asked Zhao Yunlan.

“Resentment.” Daqing took on a solemn expression—no small feat for a cat with a face like a pancake. “Suicide is a type of death seen as defying fate. There’s a high chance that souls that die this way won’t enter the reincarnation cycle. Even worse, some souls become incomplete when crossing the chasm between life and death, yin and yang. That leaves them wandering the mortal world long after they’ve forgotten how they passed on—confused even in death.”

“Places where resentment is concentrated often make people feel uncomfortable, but can it actually hurt someone?” Zhao Yunlan asked. “I’ve never heard of a case like that.”

The cat paused. “No, I’ve never heard of that either. But resentment is caused by incomplete souls. Like will consume like, and once they’ve reached a certain amount of power, they can manifest physically. That’s why I suspected the girl we saw was a manifestation of resentment from the shards of countless suffering, devoured souls.”

“What can the physical form do?”

“Nothing, really. Resentment isn’t the same as evil. It’s not as aggressive. Anyone who can be misled or even hurt by resentment is often guilty of something to begin with,” said the cat. “But these ghosts don’t have the innate power to touch the victim’s body, let alone slice her open. There’s nothing to investigate here. Let’s leave.”

Zhao Yunlan hesitated.

The black cat sighed. “When you should have some shame, it’s like an alien concept for you; when you should be flexible, you’re stubborn. The Soul-Guarding Order has been passed down for millennia now. The regulations were reduced to nothing but a page of hollow words ages ago. Why do you keep clinging to them?”

“No, I still think—” Zhao Yunlan broke off. A tenth girl was approaching the roof.

Human and cat tensed at the same moment.

The girl’s eyes passed over them, unseeing, as she slowly made her way to the railing. Like the nine previous phantoms, she abruptly hoisted herself up onto the railing and jumped. But Zhao Yunlan, suspicious from the moment she appeared, made a lunge for her and got his arms around her waist. The sudden weight made the veins in the backs of his hands stand out. He’d caught a living, solid person.

Green eyes wide with shock, the cat leaped onto the railing.

Zhao Yunlan's hold on the girl was precarious. He couldn't bring all his strength to bear. In that position, holding on with only the strength of his arms, even a child would have felt heavy, never mind a grown adult. He had one leg jammed between the bars of the railing while the entire top half of his body dangled over.

Hanging below the railing, the girl suddenly seemed to wake up. With an ear-splitting shriek, she reflexively began struggling. Zhao Yunlan could only yell in her ear, "If you keep squirming, you'll fall and there'll be nothing left of you but a flat dried persimmon! Settle down!"

A loud snap came from the railing. Perhaps it hadn't been repaired in years, or perhaps their weight was just too much for it, but regardless, it started to give way.

Zhao Yunlan seemed oblivious, still talking to the girl. "Don't worry, don't worry, just hang on—"

Another snap rang out, interrupting him, as the railing finally broke.

There was weird laughter by Zhao Yunlan's ear, like the roof was mobbed with people—spectators indifferent to his plight. They cackled, enjoying the show.

"Meow!" Daqing yowled as if someone had stepped on his tail.

At that critical moment, as the railing fully collapsed, someone kicked the little door to the roof open. A figure rushed out in a blur of impossible speed.

Zhao Yunlan had managed to shift his weight to his heels and lean back. He wrenched himself around with the girl still in his arms and shoved her toward the new arrival—then he stepped wrong, his foot finding only empty air. One now-free hand found a grip on the ledge, leaving him hanging from the eighteen-story building.

Only then did Daqing finally recognize that it was Shen Wei who'd burst onto the scene, long after they'd thought he'd left.

Shen Wei immediately pushed the suicidal girl behind him, knelt, and grabbed the arm by which Zhao Yunlan was dangling. "Your other hand! Give me your other hand! Hurry!"

Chapter 4

ZHAO YUNLAN HESITATED, but then, despite the fierce wind atop the tall building, he met Shen Wei's eyes and saw himself in their depths—himself and, somehow, the night sky, impossibly intermingled. For some reason, looking up into those eyes, Zhao Yunlan instinctively let go and placed everything, including his insignificant little life, in Shen Wei's hands.

He regretted it the moment he let go. *Is lust rotting my brain?*

In the next second, Shen Wei hauled him up by sheer force. His unimposing, scholarly appearance belied an unusually powerful grip—Zhao Yunlan's wrist was rapidly going numb, his fingers purpling. The friction pushed his sleeve up to the elbow, scraping a layer of skin from his forearm.

Then he was being held tightly in Shen Wei's arms as they both collapsed on the roof—tightly enough that his bones creaked in protest, as though Shen Wei were hugging something he'd lost long ago. A strange feeling stirred in Zhao Yunlan when he glanced at his wrist and saw the bruises from Shen Wei's hold on it.

Zhao Yunlan struggled lightly, and Shen Wei seemed to come back to his senses. He released Zhao Yunlan, adjusting his glasses as if taking refuge behind a mask.

As a worldly and experienced man, Zhao Yunlan had an exceptional gift for reading even the subtlest nuances in someone's expression. His eyes glinted. Shen Wei's awkward reaction had betrayed that he too had felt a certain…pull.

A certain *attraction*…

Ah. So Shen Wei hadn't been *afraid* of him when they first met. The stiff body language and reluctance to meet his gaze seemed more like unease rooted in shyness.

"You were in the nick of time. Thanks to you, I'm not swinging from the building like a pendulum for the university clock tower." Zhao Yunlan pulled a pack of wet wipes from his pocket and handed one to Shen Wei as he wiped the blood and grime off his own arm. "Here—for your hands."

The brush of his fingertips against Shen Wei's could have been accidental. Shen Wei's fingers were like a touch-me-not plant, shrinking back at the barest touch.

The burgeoning desire Zhao Yunlan had been feeling turned into a lit firecracker. It exploded spectacularly, leaving behind a sea of red paper that spelled out "love affair." Every nerve in his body was alight. But the dance of romance was one he knew well; there was an art to its push and pull. After that delicate overture, he pretended not to notice anything.

Turning to the girl on the ground, he asked, "What's the deal here, young lady? Going through a breakup? Got yelled at by a prof? Failed your thesis defense or an exam? Look at you brats here—your families provide for your every need, but you're all so bored out of your skulls that—"

The girl's sudden wail interrupted him as she burst into tears.

Shen Wei regained his senses at last. Very low, he said, "That was too dangerous."

Zhao Yunlan continued without missing a beat. “Exactly! Do you hear your professor? Don’t you know how dangerous that was? But come on now, stop crying. We’ll talk once we’re downstairs. We’ll have the school clinic look you over, and then we definitely need to have a chat with your parents.”

Shen Wei stood and glared at Zhao Yunlan, then turned to the girl, face darkening. For a good half a minute he said nothing, only stared sternly until her sobs died down from fear, leaving her sniffling and hiccuping.

It reminded Zhao Yunlan of his grandpa, who’d passed long ago. His grandpa had also been a traditional, well-educated man who was friendly and cordial to others and always accommodating. He never would have scolded anyone by swearing or raising his voice, let alone raising a fist. But any time he’d genuinely gotten angry, that dark look on his face had been enough to bring every one of the family’s younger brats back into line.

“If someone else were hurt because of you, would you carry that guilt to your grave?” Shen Wei insisted.

Falteringly, she said, “I… I’m sorry…”

Zhao Yunlan rubbed his nose awkwardly. “Well, no harm done. But you do need to reflect on this properly, young lady. Think about yourself. Think about your parents. At your age, what’s so hard that you can’t get over it? Come on, stop crying and get up now. Let me take you to the clinic.”

He glanced at Shen Wei to see if he had anything to add, but Shen Wei didn’t react. Zhao Yunlan went to the girl and bent down, helping her to her feet. She seemed barely able to stand, so he supported her weight as they descended.

Back inside on the top floor, he saw Guo Changcheng lying exactly where he’d been left. But before the boss could say anything, Daqing eagerly ran over and landed a barrage of “Meowvenly Meteor Paw” against Guo Changcheng’s face.

The girl’s suicide attempt had alarmed a lot of people. The previously desolate hallways seemed to have suddenly returned to the realm of the living, and many of the teaching staff poked their heads out to ask what was wrong.

Under so many curious eyes, Guo Changcheng slowly came to, letting out an inhuman wail. Face covered in blood, he opened his eyes and found his boss standing close by, supporting a young lady and looking rather the worse for wear.

Pointedly, Zhao Yunlan said, “Young people like you need to exercise more. It won’t do to let your blood sugar crash so easily in our line of work.”

Under the crowd’s watchful gaze, Guo Changcheng didn’t dare make a sound. He looked down in shame.

After a moment’s consideration, Zhao Yunlan said, “How about this. I’ve still got some work to take care of, so take Daqing and look into the victim’s background. Will you be okay if you’re the only person I send?”

He emphasized the word “person,” while Daqing, off to the side, licked his paw smugly. The cat meowed annoyingly, making Guo Changcheng shudder. Zhao Yunlan gave Guo Changcheng a benevolent pat on the head and turned to leave.

Shen Wei’s expression was still dark, but he said nothing. Someone tried to ask him what had happened in a small whisper, but he only shook his head absentmindedly. It wasn’t until they were out of everyone’s sight that he subconsciously pressed his fingers to his collarbones. Something like a pendant’s

outline was faintly visible through his thin shirt. He closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath, then hurried to catch up.

As they headed down, Zhao Yunlan asked, “What’s your name?”

“…Li Qian.”

“Which department are you in? What year?”

“Foreign Languages department… First-year graduate student.”

“Are you a local?”

Li Qian hesitated before nodding, half a beat late.

“What was that all about just now?”

This time, Li Qian didn’t respond.

Zhao Yunlan glanced at her pensively. This girl named Li Qian had an unmistakable smear of heavy darkness under her eyes. Her gaze was empty, her eyes bloodshot, and her forehead ashen, as if she were knocking on death’s door. From head to toe, she radiated misfortune.

Shen Wei suddenly said, “The Foreign Languages program has a high grade requirement for students who want to take humanities electives. Have you been in any of my classes?”

After a careful glance at him, Li Qian nodded.

Shen Wei spoke like a born lecturer. His voice was low and pleasant to the ear, words coming at an easy, steady pace. He sighed and said gravely, “Life and death are of great significance. In all of my classes, I tell my students that in this world, there are only two acceptable reasons to give your life. The first is to die for your home and country, by which you fulfill your duty. The other is to die for someone who truly knows you. In that way, you fulfill yourself. Outside of those things, treating your life lightly is an act of cowardice. Do you understand?”

“I…” Li Qian’s voice trembled, but she regained control of herself and pursed her lips. “I’m sorry, Shen-laoshi. I was… I was really just acting on impulse. I wasn’t thinking clearly. The blood just went to my head, and I rushed out there and almost dragged…”

She looked at Zhao Yunlan, then hung her head again. Director Zhao was incredibly handsome and his expression appeared kind, but somehow Li Qian was still a little scared of him. When their eyes met, she unconsciously shrank back against Shen Wei’s side.

Zhao Yunlan got out a cigarette and lit it, then gave her the faintest hint of a smile. “You don’t know what came over you? Miss, I’ve only ever heard of someone killing somebody else on impulse. Someone killing themselves on impulse is a rare sight indeed. What, were you possessed?”

At the word “possessed,” Li Qian immediately paled.

Zhao Yunlan refused to go easy on her. “What were you afraid of? Tell us the truth. What exactly did you see up on the roof?”

Li Qian let out a dry chuckle. “Just… Just the roof. What else is there to see?”

“Well, I saw…” Zhao Yunlan gazed straight ahead and exhaled a languid breath of smoke. “When you jumped, I saw a lot of people up there. They were all

watching you and laughing."

Li Qian hugged herself as shudders racked her body. She was clenching her teeth so hard that from up close the grinding was audible. Zhao Yunlan observed her for a moment, flicked his cigarette, and then reached out to push her shoulder. "All right, in you go. We're here."

After greeting the teacher on duty at the clinic's entrance, Zhao Yunlan passed Li Qian over to Shen Wei, then went to stand near the entryway, cigarette still dangling between his lips.

Right out in front, there was a man-made creek with a small bridge over it. Zhao Yunlan leaned against the wooden railing lazily. Slowly, he blew a puff of smoke over his watch. The white smoke dispersed quickly, leaving a thin haze within the watch face. An old woman's face faded in and out of view, as if she were meeting his gaze through the watch.

"The old cat wasn't wrong. A newly made ghost who died within the last seven days, showing up on Clarity in broad daylight? Not even a neighborhood committee official in life would be that fierce, usually." Zhao Yunlan raised a brow as he muttered to himself. "So, Granny, where did you come from?"

At the sound of footsteps behind him, he gently wiped the watch plate. The silhouette within vanished. Unhurriedly, he blew a few smoke rings, then turned to see Shen Wei approaching with a small tray of first aid items. Setting the tray aside, Shen Wei caught hold of Zhao Yunlan's scraped arm without leaving him room to protest. Eyes lowered, he rolled up Zhao Yunlan's sleeve carefully before reaching for some distilled water.

"I can do that myself," Zhao Yunlan said.

"How would you propose to do that?" Shen Wei kept his head down. After rinsing the scrape with the distilled water, he cleaned it with cotton, a bit at a time. All the while, he held the arm as if it were a fragile treasure. "Let me know if I'm too heavy-handed."

"A quick rinse with tap water would've been fine."

Still not looking up, Shen Wei said, "In this heat, there's a risk of infection if it's not cleaned properly."

Shen Wei's eyelashes were very long. With his head bowed, his features appeared delicate. The shape of his eyelids was so perfectly defined that they might have been drawn on. With every blink, his lashes fluttered ever so slightly, and Zhao Yunlan's heart fluttered along with them.

Zhao Yunlan had extraordinary self-confidence, but he wasn't confident enough to think he could make anyone fall in love at first sight. Besides, Shen Wei looked virtuous, with a hushed, tranquil air—not the sort of shallow person whose heart could be stolen by appearance alone.

Then why…

Shen Wei cleaned the scrape and applied ointment, but when he attempted to bandage it, Zhao Yunlan put his foot down.

"It's just a scratch. Who'd wrap something so minor in gauze in such hot weather? Anyone who saw it would wonder what's wrong with me." Zhao Yunlan put out his cigarette, then slung an arm naturally around Shen Wei's back. "I'm going to check on that girl. Shall we go together?"

The gesture turned Shen Wei as rigid as a board. He staggered for a few steps as Zhao Yunlan steered him, flushing from his neck to the tips of his ears. Then he scrambled out of Zhao Yunlan's hold, smoothing his shirt in an attempt to appear composed.

"Why are you like a girl?" Zhao Yunlan smiled nonchalantly, but he switched gears before Shen Wei could catch his breath. "Shen-laoshi, have you ever seen me before today?"

Surprised, Shen Wei met his gaze, mind going blank. For two full seconds, he could only stare at Zhao Yunlan, unable to look away. Finally, his throat a little dry, he said, "I… Yes. I saw you before."

Zhao Yunlan raised an eyebrow and waited for him to finish.

"I…" A conflicted expression flitted across Shen Wei's face. Just as Zhao Yunlan thought he was about to tell a fantastic story of how incredibly their lives were entangled, Shen Wei's tone lightened. "Actually, I saw your team working on a case."

Zhao Yunlan felt a sudden pang of disappointment, as though his hopes had been lifted just to be let down gently. "Oh? When was that?"

"Five or six years ago, during that string of twelve suicides at the twin towers near Wanqing Bridge. It was when I was about to graduate. I'd just moved off campus and happened to be looking at apartments in that area. Because of the deaths, business was bleak for that building, so the rent was cheap. I was one of the few people who felt brave enough to live there."

Zhao Yunlan tried to recall. "I was there, but I'm sure I'd remember seeing you."

"You didn't see me, but I was living on the top floor. I saw you, and I also saw…" Shen Wei paused, schooling his face into an expression of disbelief at just the right moment. "I saw you capture a black shadow from one of the rooms up there. You stuffed it into a bottle, then turned to someone and said, 'I've caught the suspect. Everyone can wrap up.' Except…you were clearly the only person there."

Astonished, Zhao Yunlan asked, "You not only dared to live there but lived on the top floor? You sure had a lot of guts."

"At the time, I didn't believe in that kind of thing. I was a poor college student." Shen Wei lowered his head. Then—not making himself sound any less suspicious—he said, "You can check the records. I'm telling the truth."

From Zhao Yunlan's glance, it wasn't clear how much he actually believed. "That's negligence on my part," he joked. "Regulations say we should've wiped the memory of any bystanders, but the success went to my head and I didn't notice you. My sincere apologies. Did you feel like your whole atheist worldview completely collapsed back then?"

Shen Wei offered a strained, reserved smile but didn't answer.

When the two of them entered the clinic, they found Li Qian sitting up in bed in the room she'd been put in, holding a glass of hot sugar water the doctor had given her. She was backlit against the window, making her expression seem even gloomier.

Zhao Yunlan raised a hand and knocked on the door. Li Qian looked up in alarm. Recognizing him, she slowly let out a breath of relief.

He checked his watch. It still reflected the old woman's shadow, but the watch's hands hadn't turned red. Bizarrely, the new ghost's vitality seemed to be getting stronger.

If signs of death appeared on a living person, it meant their life was about to be snuffed out like a candle. But what could it mean to see life blooming on someone who was dead?

Was she about to reincarnate?

As Zhao Yunlan pondered it, he boldly sat on the bed across from Li Qian and got out a notebook. "Okay, Tongxue, I still need to ask you a few things." Li Qian looked at him, her face pale.

Since Shen-laoshi had made it plain that he knew the nature of Zhao Yunlan's job, there was no need to beat around the bush. Bluntly, Zhao Yunlan asked, "Have you recently been able to see things you shouldn't have?"

Li Qian's expression of utter terror was all the answer he needed.

"I understand now." Zhao Yunlan stared at the spot between her brows. He leaned forward slightly, hand resting on his knee. "But I can tell your third eye hasn't been opened. Theoretically, you shouldn't be able to see anything. Were you touched by these things because your birth chart[11] is too troubled, or did you mess with something you shouldn't have?"

Li Qian bit her lip. Her fingers twisted together until her knuckles whitened.

"Oh? Seems like it's the latter. Tell me, what did you touch?" Zhao Yunlan kept his voice low. When she didn't reply, he laughed coldly. "If you don't tell me, you'll be haunted by it for the rest of your life. Haven't you ever heard that curiosity killed the cat? Some things shouldn't be messed with."

"A sundial," Li Qian eventually said, breaking her silence. "It's a family heirloom. It had already turned black from being there for so long. On the back, there's a round plate with lots of inlaid stones that look like fish scales. They're black crystal—similar to wujing stone, the elders said."

Zhao Yunlan's pen stilled. "A sundial?"

Li Qian nodded.

"The sundial goes around once a day; the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, over and over, symbolizing life's endless cycle of reincarnation." Zhao Yunlan sat deep in thought for a while before continuing. "But there's another way of looking at it. Some people believe reincarnation is an endless cycle of killing, the old replaced by the new. What's lost will be lost forever, and what has passed will never return. With a turn of the clock, one can look back, but not go back. With a turn of the reincarnation cycle, though, even if one tried to look back, they wouldn't know which way to look."

Behind him, unseen, a sudden tremor went through Shen Wei.

"What did you use it for?" Zhao Yunlan asked.

Li Qian bit her lip again.

"Okay, let me rephrase. Did you do anything bad with it?"

Her eyes grew wide. "I didn't!"

Zhao Yunlan stared at her in silence.

“I really didn’t!” Li Qian curled up, reflexively trying to protect herself. “How could I use something passed down in my family to do something bad? You’re full of shit! You…” She coughed, worked up to the point of choking. More harsh coughs followed.

Shen Wei’s forehead creased. He walked over and blocked Zhao Yunlan’s penetrating gaze, patting Li Qian’s back. “Take your time. There’s no rush.”

To Zhao Yunlan, he said, “She’s just been through a significant shock. Whatever it is you want to ask, Officer Zhao, can you not push her too hard?”

Zhao Yunlan raised a brow. “Okay, I’ll stick to the most relevant things. One last question. After that, I’ll fuck off.”

He pulled a picture of the dead girl from his pocket. “Have you seen this student recently?”

Li Qian’s gaze swept over the picture. First, she shook her head. Then, as if suddenly recalling something, she grasped the photo and examined it carefully. Finally, she ventured, “I think… I think I saw someone who looked kind of like her yesterday…”

Zhao Yunlan’s expression turned serious. “Yesterday when? Do you remember what she was wearing?”

“In the evening.” Li Qian thought about it. “Last night, I’d just returned after the library closed. It was probably after 10 p.m. I left campus to buy some stuff. At the entrance, I think I saw someone who looked like her, but I don’t really remember what she was wearing… Oh! No, I do remember. She was in an Orientation Week T-shirt. I noticed because I have one too.”

“Were there a lot of people wearing that shirt yesterday?”

“Pretty much only students from our school,” Li Qian said. “I wouldn’t say a lot of people. Most students are at the new campus. There aren’t a lot of people here at the old one to begin with.”

“Were you wearing your matching shirt?”

“It hadn’t been washed, so I didn’t want to wear it against my skin. At first, I wore it over my own T-shirt. When the weather got hot later, I took it off and stuffed it in my bag.”

Zhao Yunlan considered that. “When you saw her, was anyone else around?”

“Yeah, there were a lot of people passing by, and cars too.” Li Qian, realizing he was trying to get at something, asked, “Why?”

“I wasn’t asking about the main road. I mean that little alley outside the side entrance to your school. That’s where she was walking, right? At the time, was there anyone else in that alley?”

Li Qian began to feel uneasy. Her gaze drifted to the side. She nodded, then shook her head, confused. “I… I don’t remember. Maybe…? I think she went that way, but I didn’t follow her. That alley’s a dead end. Only people who live in the dorms on the east side of campus would take the shortcut through there, so it’s usually fairly quiet…”

“You didn’t go that way?” Zhao Yunlan interrupted.

“Huh? Ah… I didn’t…”

"Why not? Don't you also live on the east side?"

"I…" Li Qian didn't know what to say. She mumbled to herself and then, panicked, she said, "I was taking the long way to go buy something…"

"Didn't you just say you'd already finished shopping and had just left?" Zhao Yunlan interrupted again. His tone was harsh now. "Tongxue, there's nothing I want more than to be a friendly neighborhood Mr. Policeman. I don't want to scare you. But you need to do your part to cooperate with the investigation, so tell me the truth, okay?"

Freshly nervous, Li Qian clutched the hem of her shirt. "I-I *am* telling the truth."

"Her name was Lu Ruomei. She was a graduate student at Dragon City University too. You're asking me what happened yesterday? I'll tell you: your fellow student was murdered last night." Pausing after every word, focused intently on Li Qian's expression, he said, "The estimated time of death is last night at 10 p.m. That means you may very well be the last person who saw her alive."

Li Qian's pupils contracted as the glass she was holding fell and shattered on the floor. She seemed as if she were in a trance: the corners of her eyes twitched nervously and her fingers, which she had unclenched unconsciously, were trembling. Her lips paled until they were nearly blue.

Zhao Yunlan leaned back and crossed his legs. Lacing his fingers together over his knee, he looked at her. "Why are you so shaken? If the victim's death has nothing to do with you, and you didn't even know her, why are you so afraid right now? Why did you take a detour last night instead of going through that alley?"

A short scream escaped her. Li Qian slumped down, fingers in her hair, and hid her face.

Taking one of her wrists firmly, Zhao Yunlan pulled her hand away. Sternly, he said, "It's no use trying to evade this. Look at me and tell me exactly what you saw."

Li Qian shoved his hand off. In her struggle, the hospital bed shifted. Its metal legs scraped the floor with a rough grating noise.

"I don't know!" Hysterical, she kept yelling, "I don't know! I don't know! Don't ask me! I don't know!"

"Your campus isn't very large." Zhao Yunlan lowered his voice. "Perhaps you passed by her when eating breakfast one day. Maybe you've shared the same study room, borrowed the same book.

"Do you want to know how she died? When we found her, her corpse was lying all alone in the alley. Something sharp tore her open and half of her organs were dug out. We don't know for sure what happened to them, but there *was* a chunk of her intestine with teeth marks on it, so it's reasonable to think her killer ate them. All that blood… *Tch*, it was all over the ground. The bloodstains are still there. Also, did you know—"

Li Qian began to scream wordlessly.

Zhao Yunlan was unmoved, as if he had a heart of metal or stone. He didn't let up. "She was still alive when her belly was ripped open. She had to see her own liver, kidneys, and stomach lifted out of her body. She would have been able to hear the chewing as her organs were eaten. Can you imagine what that must have been like?"

Already hoarse from screaming, Li Qian crumpled to her knees on the floor, curling into a ball with her arms around her head.

The doctor on duty heard the commotion and hurried over. “What happened? What’s going on?”

Zhao Yunlan thrust his work ID under the doctor’s nose, then reached out and shut the door in his face. “Sorry, police questioning. Give me another five minutes. Thank you.”

Folding his arms, Zhao Yunlan leaned against the door. He looked at Li Qian again and repeated himself a third time. “Tell me. What did you see?”

Abruptly, this time she answered him. “A… A shadow.”

His expression went solemn. He went back to her in large strides and squatted beside her. “What kind of shadow?”

Shen Wei couldn’t help but speak up. “Both of you be careful of the glass.” He grabbed a broom from the corner and swept the shards off to the side. After a moment’s hesitation, he asked, “Should I leave?” and turned to his student. “Here, how about I get you more water?”

Zhao Yunlan waved the offer away. “No, it’s good that you’re here. Don’t leave. I don’t have a female coworker with me, and it’s against regulations to question her alone.” As he spoke, he helped Li Qian uncurl and sit up, then handed her a packet of tissues from the little side table. “What kind of shadow? Take your time.”

“When she passed by me, I saw her school T-shirt and realized she was a fellow student. So I greeted her, even though we didn’t know each other. She just said, ‘Excuse me,’ and rushed past. That’s when…” Li Qian looked up, shuddering violently. Her eyes were bloodshot. “That’s when I saw her shadow—her *shadows*. She had more than one.”

Softly, Shen Wei said, “Multiple light sources will create multiple shadows. Perhaps…”

“That’s not it. It wasn’t like that!” Li Qian cut him off, voice trembling. “It wasn’t that kind of shadow. It appeared out of thin air where there was no light. It was so much darker than the other shadows, and…and worst of all…*it didn’t move with her!*”

The room was suddenly eerily still. Li Qian shook as if her bones were about to come apart. Shen Wei paused, bent over, and patted her head comfortingly. “Tongxue, please try to be calm.”

“I saw it, Shen-laoshi. I swear I saw it.” Li Qian grabbed the hem of his shirt and burst into tears. “It kept following her. I saw. The second she walked into that alley, it suddenly…it suddenly stood up, like a real person. I was so afraid. I ran for my life.

“I thought I must have been dreaming or having a hallucination, you see? But then you—you just *had* to ask me. You had to tell me that she…she’s already…”

At that point, she seemed to remember Zhao Yunlan’s description. She jumped up, pushed Shen Wei away, and bolted to the corner, where she threw up.

There was a rebuke in the look Shen Wei threw Zhao Yunlan.

“Uh…don’t worry,” Zhao Yunlan said. “This is a pretty minimal reaction. You weren’t at the scene this morning. One of our newbies puked so much he practically turned into a sea cucumber.”

Shen Wei’s gaze turned helpless. He shook his head and went into the hallway, where he got a bottle of water from the doctor, who’d kept looking inside. Then he let Li Qian rinse her mouth and helped her back up. Li Qian couldn’t quite stand on her own, but she stumbled back to the bed with Shen Wei’s help. Eyes dull, she looked at Zhao Yunlan. “It killed someone, and it’ll kill me too. I saw it. It won’t let me go, will it?”

Zhao Yunlan didn’t answer the question. “Can you describe it for me?”

“I didn’t get a clear look, but…it was human shaped. When it stood up, it must have been about this tall.” Li Qian gestured with her hands. “All black and a little short, so it looked a bit fat.”

Zhao Yunlan’s pen stopped moving. Brows furrowed, he repeated, “A little short and a little fat?”

She nodded.

“Is it possible that it’s not actually short? Could it have run off as soon as you saw it, so it hadn’t managed to stand up fully?”

Li Qian stilled, her reaction even more delayed than before. Then she lowered her eyes, evading Zhao Yunlan’s gaze, and nodded again. “It’s… It’s possible.”

Something odd entered the look he was giving her. “And then?”

“Well, then I ran.” She kept her head down and Zhao Yunlan scrutinized her in silence. Her fingers were tangled together, the tips turning white.

Finally, Zhao Yunlan let it go. He ripped a page from his notebook and wrote down a string of numbers. “If there are any clues, or if you remember anything new, please contact me as soon as possible. My phone is on 24/7. Thank you for your help.” He shoved the note at Li Qian and stood up.

“I’ll see you off,” said Shen Wei.

“No need,” Zhao Yunlan replied. “I’m going to have a smoke outside first. You talk to her. I was a tad brusque just now, so I might have scared the kid. My apologies.”

Shen Wei looked at Li Qian. It was impossible to know what she was thinking; she showed no reaction to Zhao Yunlan’s words.

Once Zhao Yunlan was gone, cigarette already between his lips, Shen Wei asked Li Qian, “Are you hungry? I can get you some food from the cafeteria later.” He kept his voice as gentle as possible.

With Zhao Yunlan’s departure, the oppressive feeling he’d brought with him also dissipated. Li Qian found it easier to breathe, and exhaustion finally caught up with her. She shook her head weakly.

Shen Wei said, “Then I’ll get the doctor to come stay with you for a while. Rest here for a bit. Once you feel better, you can go back, okay?”

Li Qian nodded.

He began to leave, but after two steps, a thought struck him. He turned back. “Do you have any money on you? If not, how about I leave some with you for now?”

It was clear he meant well. With great difficulty, Li Qian mustered a smile. “Thank you, but there’s really no need.”

Shen Wei sighed, as if there was something on his mind. Eventually he said, “Some lies are told deliberately, Tongxue, while some are not. The former serve to deceive others, while the latter deceive oneself. Either way, it’s very sad.”

The words were general enough, but Li Qian froze. Shen Wei dropped his gaze. “Never mind. I wish you well.”

Having said that, he acquired a small bottle of ointment from the pharmacy next door, then hurried outside.

Zhao Yunlan was still in the hallway, in the middle of a call.

“I looked into it. This time it’s the other side’s problem, not ours.” It was a woman’s voice on the line—but not Wang Zheng’s. This woman spoke in a sibilant way, dragging out her final syllables in a faint hiss. It gave her voice a flirtatious note. “Last night, as soon as the Gates of the Netherworld opened, a dozen registered Netherworld souls went missing. Most of them were newly dead, not even seven days postmortem. One, they still yearned for the mortal world, and two, they didn’t understand the rules. But it’s fine—they can’t cause too much trouble. What *is* a real problem is that a Hunger Ghost apparently also escaped in the chaos.”

“I’m sorry, a *what* escaped?” Zhao Yunlan thought he’d misheard.

“A Hunger Ghost.”

“How could they let a Hunger Ghost loose in the Mortal Realm? Are they *trying* to lose their jobs?” If fury could burn, Zhao Yunlan would be a fire hazard.

“The Netherworld’s current government really isn’t up to the job. The other side’s always been like that. They’ll show up if they think it’ll benefit them, but they’ll vanish into thin air at the first sign of trouble. It’s not like any of this is news to you.” The woman paused. “One more thing—we got a message from *him*. I think he’s probably going to stop by personally, but I don’t dare open it to be sure. Hurry and come back.”

“Why would he be coming?” Zhao Yunlan’s brow creased. “Okay, got it. Meanwhile, I have a few tasks for you. First, the murder happened right across from University Street, and there’s a security camera at that intersection. Maybe it caught something, so get that footage. Second, look into Li Qian, a first-year grad student at DCU. She’s studying Foreign Languages. And third, see if the other side can tell us about an old sundial made of black stone with fish scales carved into it. Find out what exactly that is.”

Glimpsing Shen Wei’s approach from the corner of his eye, Zhao Yunlan lowered his voice. “That’s all for now. I have to go, so I’ll talk to you later. Keep me posted on any developments.”

In the blink of an eye, Zhao Yunlan banished the irritation from his face as he turned, an old pervert magically transforming into a young bohemian. Gently and with great courtesy, he said, “Ah no, Shen-laoshi, you’re much too polite. No need to walk me out.”

Chapter 5

SHEN WEI SHOVED the ointment he'd picked up toward Zhao Yunlan. "You forgot about this, so I brought you some."

As he spoke, he looked at the scrape on Zhao Yunlan's arm. His brows drew together. "Once you're home, please be careful. Make sure to keep the wound dry, try not to eat anything too spicy, and…" He trailed off. Zhao Yunlan was staring at him in silence. Uneasy, Shen Wei asked, "What is it?"

Zhao Yunlan responded by changing the topic entirely. "Shen-laoshi, are you married?"

Shen Wei froze and answered reflexively. "No. Why…?"

"Oh," Zhao Yunlan said. "Then is there a girlfriend in the picture?"

There was an invasive edge to how he was looking at Shen Wei. It somehow made Shen Wei feel that there was no right answer to the question.

Zhao Yunlan took the chance to accept the ointment, turning it over in his hands. With a hint of a smile, he said, "Forget it. I'd just think someone so young and successful, not to mention meticulous and considerate, would be very popular. But it's none of my business. I'm sorry."

Shen Wei was embarrassed, but Zhao Yunlan only smiled, revealing two dimples, as he added, "Oh, right. Can I borrow your phone for a sec?"

He got his phone out, but Zhao Yunlan didn't take it. Instead, he lifted Shen Wei's hand and gently held the back of it while he casually entered his own name and number into Shen Wei's contacts. He saved it, dialed the number, and then hung up after one ring.

"Just making sure you have my contact information," he said, pretending to be serious. "If anything else comes up related to the case, feel free to harass me."

Then he tossed the little bottle up in the air, caught it, and waved to Shen Wei. "Thank you so much. I have to go, but after I've closed this case, I'll be sure to treat you to a meal, Shen-laoshi."

This time, he was in no hurry to leave. He shoved a hand in his pants pocket and swaggered off. His silhouette was casual, even careless, but the lines of his body were curved and angled in all the right places. It gave his leisurely stride an air of grace. He was like a peacock with its tail spread, seizing every opportunity to display his colorful plumage and spread his hormones around.

It wasn't until he'd gone a good way off that the bashful unease faded from Shen Wei's face. There was a maelstrom of barely leashed emotion in his eyes. After one last look at Zhao Yunlan disappearing in the distance, he headed in the other direction.

But only a dozen steps later, Shen Wei couldn't help looking back, even though the person he wanted to see had already disappeared from view. When he looked through his phone's contacts, he found a flirtatious "a-Lan" innocently displayed on the screen. As he silently drank in those two syllables, he felt as if a knife were slipping cleanly through his heart, turning the softest part to a bloody pulp. Finally, his narrow lips locked the words away where no one could hear them.

Shen Wei lifted his fingers and caught the faint scent of Zhao Yunlan's cologne. Closing his eyes, he took a slow, deep breath. He didn't know *what* cologne it might be, but from the very first whiff, it was as if the scent had been haunting his dreams for years on end.

The only sound on the quiet campus was that of bright green leaves falling to the ground. Nothing could have been gleaned from Shen Wei's expression. After a while, the corner of his mouth quirked up in something like self-mockery. Then he looked down and hurried away.

For that brief moment as he glanced down, the faint desolation evaporated. His face tightened, as if carved to reveal a silent, murderous intent.

As for Guo Changcheng, the stupid kid had been tasked with getting a sense of the situation. But since he genuinely didn't know what exactly he should be getting a sense of, all he could do was suck it up and talk to people, stammering the whole time. He was keenly self-aware when it came to his own professional capabilities: in his mind, even the parrots in the flower and bird markets were more eloquent than him.

Close to noon, he finally received a call from Zhao Yunlan. Dejected, he led the weird, talking black cat to the school entrance, squatted down, and waited for their boss to come collect them.

Even the way Guo Changcheng squatted was different from everyone else. He curled into a ball, his hair half covering his face. He and the double-chinned fat cat sitting upright beside him were blatantly out of place, periodically drawing glances from curious passersby. The embarrassing display finally ended half an hour later when Zhao Yunlan arrived. Guo Changcheng, whose legs had gone numb from squatting, limped along in Zhao Yunlan's wake.

As they walked the campus' beautiful, quiet paths, Guo Changcheng kept sneaking glances at Zhao Yunlan's tall, lean figure. His own expression and mannerisms were akin to a sad, worried little wife who had accidentally set the kitchen on fire.

In the half hour he'd spent squatting by the wall, Guo Changcheng had reflected deeply on the series of events that had unfolded in the twelve hours since he'd joined the Special Investigations Department, and now he was overcome with despondency. Hadn't it been just a slightly eerie hallway? Hadn't it been just a little dark and creepy? Hadn't his boss just said something ambiguous? How had it all made him faint?

All along, Guo Changcheng had felt he was woefully unqualified to join the Special Investigations Department, which offered higher pay and better bonuses than anywhere else. And yet somehow, in some unworthy way, he had gotten in. If he wound up unable to keep the job, never mind losing face—how could he possibly tell his uncle?

As these heavy thoughts worried away at him, he looked at Zhao Yunlan, who was carrying Daqing on his shoulders. Due to the cat's great bulk, Zhao Yunlan had to walk with his neck bent, as if he'd suffered a stroke. Yet despite that, he looked handsome and elegant—a handsome, elegant stroke victim. Director Zhao clearly wasn't that much older than Guo Changcheng, but he always seemed so sure of himself, as if he wasn't afraid of anything.

Just then, Zhao Yunlan glanced back. Guo Changcheng hastily averted his gaze.

"What is it? What do you want to say?"

Guo Changcheng looked at the ground. The bangs covering his eyes were a little greasy, resembling a tidy row of black lines.

"If you have something to say, just say it. From now on we'll have to communicate a lot for work. As you get to know me, you'll realize that I'm very good-tempered and straightforward. Even if I get really upset about something, I'll forget about it after a night's sleep."

Zhao Yunlan lied through his teeth without even needing to make notes. Daqing, listening beside his head, nearly threw up from disgust.

"I… I… I…" Guo Changcheng tried to answer but couldn't manage to speak at first. His eyes were red before he finally blurted, "I just think I'm useless!"

Oho, Zhao Yunlan thought, delighted. *So you do have some self-awareness!*

But he maintained his two-faced act, determinedly putting on a warm, affectionate expression. "Okay, young man. This is your first time out in the field. Why worry about a little setback? Who among us hasn't made mistakes? Let's take it slow. Don't worry, I believe in you. Don't overthink things. Now tell me, what did you find out from the teachers?"

"Oh… Oh!" Guo Changcheng hurriedly produced a notebook from his little crossbody bag. "I found… The victim's name is Lu Ruomei. She was a postgraduate student from the math department, a local from a middle-class family. There aren't many girls in the math department, so everyone usually looked after her, which also meant she got along well with people at school. I didn't hear about her having conflicts with anyone. Recently, she'd been applying for admin positions at the university. She spent quite a lot of time on off-campus activities, so her grades weren't the best…"

He spewed all of this bullshit at length, and for once, Zhao Yunlan actually heard him out patiently. When he finally wound down, Zhao Yunlan even asked, "So what do *you* think?"

"I think…her grad school application could have given her competitors motive. Or maybe she offended someone during her off-campus extracurricular activities. We can start by investigating her social connections. Perhaps the culprit is among them." Guo Changcheng stopped there and peeked at Zhao Yunlan anxiously, showing no confidence at all. "I… For the time being, this was all I could come up with."

Not addressing whether he was right or wrong, Zhao Yunlan nodded slowly. "Then how do you think she died?"

Guo Changcheng wasn't sure what to make of the question. He could only say cluelessly, "Murdered?"

Zhao Yunlan didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Alas, Comrade Guo Changcheng probably didn't even know how to write the words "read the room." He let out a breath of relief when he saw Zhao Yunlan laugh and broke into a timid, foolish smile.

Director Zhao had never had to deal with such a weirdo. There was no way out of this excruciating situation but to push through, no matter how much internal

damage he had to suffer in silence. He forced himself into an enigmatic, leaderly stance and said, “You did great. That was very detailed. You have potential.”

Guo Changcheng’s head snapped up. The man before him was gazing down with a pleasant, kind smile wreathing his face. His eyes and brows were more beautiful than Guo Changcheng could express. Those few words flooded him with warmth and strength, and his face went red. His boss was way too good to him—so good that Guo Changcheng suddenly understood the ancient saying, “A man is willing to die for the one who truly understands him.” If Director Zhao cherished and valued him like that, even his life wouldn’t be too great a sacrifice.

And so, Guo Changcheng voluntarily took on a task even more difficult for him than dying: calling and interacting with strangers. “Then… Then I’ll go investigate her social connections!”

“What’s the rush? Zhu Hong is still on duty at the office. I’ll give her a call later and ask her to do it,” Zhao Yunlan said with the false sincerity of one deceiving a child. “How about this? I’ll give you another task that should be a great learning experience. You saw that girl who tried to commit suicide earlier, right? She’s an important eyewitness, but I think she’s hiding something. I want you to follow her and find out why she’s keeping something from us.”

Eyes aglow, Guo Changcheng snapped up straight. “Yes, sir!”

“Mm. Go on, then,” said Zhao Yunlan with a nod.

Guo Changcheng turned and ran, blood singing in his veins. With his puffed-up chest and gallant movements, one would have thought he was about to throw himself toward enemy fire, not tail someone.

Zhao Yunlan watched the intern go. To the black cat on his shoulder, he said, “Mortals.”

Daqing raised his large pancake face. “Doesn’t get any more mortal than that.”

“The Soul-Guarding Order must’ve blue-screened.” Zhao Yunlan patted the kitty’s rump. “I need to go back to the office to check something. Keep an eye on him.”

Daqing meowed lazily, sprang from his shoulder like a ball shot from a bow, and rolled away at the speed of light.

Chapter 6

WHEN SHEN WEI ARRIVED back at the clinic with food from the cafeteria, he found Guo Changcheng standing anxiously at the entrance. The young intern was looking to and fro, clearly wanting to go in but just as clearly too afraid. Daqing, the precocious cat, sat off to the side, blatantly ignoring everything. His gut bulged as he groomed his shiny black fur.

"Aren't you…" Shen Wei paused awkwardly. Earlier, precisely none of his attention had been on the person before him now. "I'm sorry, but how should I address you?"

This gave Guo Changcheng a fright, but then he recognized Shen Wei. Facing him, Guo Changcheng felt a lot less nervous. It was clear that Shen Wei was a good person. His presence didn't give off the sense of constant pressure that Zhao Yunlan's did, no matter how kind the boss was being. *Perhaps that's the charm of an intellectual,* Guo Changcheng thought admiringly. Shen Wei could stand shoulder to shoulder with someone with a powerful aura without seeming weak, and yet when standing beside someone like Guo Changcheng, who was a lifetime member of the Church of Uselessness, he didn't seem at all high and mighty.

"My surname is Guo," Guo Changcheng said sheepishly.

"Officer xiao-Guo, then." Shen Wei smiled. "What brings you here?"

Guo Changcheng hesitated, unsure if he could tell anyone about the task his boss had given him. Unable to decide, he looked down and searched for a clue in Daqing's expression. Daqing, however, was a long-haired cat with a face of glossy black fur. There were no answers to be found there.

Daqing silently face-pawed. *In broad daylight, you'd rather consult a cat than form a coherent sentence?*

Fortunately, Shen Wei recognized the problem. Seeing Guo Changcheng's internal conflict, he immediately said, "My apologies—I spoke without thinking. I was just asking casually. Sorry, I wasn't trying to pry."

Guo Changcheng lowered his head in shame, even though he didn't understand what he should feel ashamed about.

"Have you eaten?" Shen Wei asked. "I bought a lot. If you'd like, why don't you come in and have some too?"

Guo Changcheng was about to refuse when his stomach growled. The last time he'd had anything to eat or drink had been the previous night—almost an entire day earlier.

While he wavered trying to decide, Shen Wei successfully lured Daqing. "Come, kitty. I bought milk. The doctor on duty probably went to eat too. We'll be quiet and not let anyone see."

Since Daqing was the only source of courage Guo Changcheng had, seeing the cat succumb to sweet temptation left him no choice but to follow.

Perhaps hoping to keep Guo Changcheng from feeling too awkward, Shen Wei tried to make small talk. "Officer xiao-Guo, you look very young—not much older than my students. You haven't been working for long, have you?"

"Today's my second day," Guo Changcheng said truthfully.

Shen Wei smiled. "Then you really must be right around my students' age. How does it feel to join the workforce?"

It didn't feel so great, to be honest. But Guo Changcheng still considered his words carefully. "It's…all right."

As he led them, human and cat, down the school clinic's narrow hallways, Shen Wei's gaze flashed behind his glasses, but he continued as if nothing were out of the ordinary. "Do your coworkers and your…boss…treat you well?"

"Director Zhao's pretty good to me. Oh—he's who was here this morning. My coworkers…" And here Guo Changcheng's expression contorted slightly as he thought of lao-Wu's papier-mâché-like face and how it seemed as though Wang Zheng's head had been chopped off and sewn back on. Painfully, he said, "They're… They're also fine."

"'Director Zhao,'" Shen Wei echoed quietly, before asking, "Is your Director Zhao normally busy?"

Guo Changcheng scratched his head. "He… Probably? I-It's my first day. I really don't know."

"What do you think of him?"

"He's great," Guo Changcheng replied automatically.

Shen Wei looked at him. "Then why are you a little afraid of him?"

Shocked, Guo Changcheng said, "He's my boss! Of course… Of course I…"

As they reached the room where Li Qian was resting, Shen Wei burst out laughing.

He arranged the food on the table quickly and divided the utensils, then ripped the lid off a single-use container, filled it with some warm milk, and pushed it toward Daqing. "Everyone eat. Don't just sit there."

Hunger made his stomach feel like a gaping hole, but Guo Changcheng still didn't have much of an appetite. Back in school, he normally never ate at the cafeteria—not because he was spoiled and looked down on the food, but because as soon as the cafeteria got crowded, someone inevitably came to sit at his table. That was all it took to make him uneasy and kill his appetite, never mind *this* situation, eating with two strangers in a hospital room.

Li Qian had even less appetite. Given her current mental state, if the doctor hadn't pronounced her fine, Shen Wei would almost have suspected she was on drugs. He also realized that if he didn't say anything, the only sound in the entire room would be Daqing drinking milk, which was painfully awkward. There was no choice but to keep up the small talk. He asked Li Qian, "You said you're a local. Do you live far away? If so, you should go home and rest for a few days. I'll talk to your advisor for you if necessary."

Her chopsticks paused imperceptibly as she hesitated. Finally, she said softly, "My family… My family is making funeral arrangements at the moment. There are a lot of relatives coming to stay, so there's no room for me."

Shen Wei stilled. Li Qian poked at the rice in her bowl faintly with her chopsticks and added, "My grandma passed away two days ago."

He apologized at once. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize. My condolences.”

Li Qian lowered her head without responding. She picked at the plain white rice, ignoring the side dishes.

Shen Wei commandeered an extra pair of chopsticks to use as communal serving utensils. Putting some food in her bowl, he said, “I bought some dishes at random. I don’t know if it’s to your tastes, but try to eat some, at least.”

Guo Changcheng, who had been pretending not to exist, suddenly butted in. “When I was younger, I was brought up by my grandma too. She passed away when I was in eleventh grade. Because of that, I took half a year off school.”

Both Shen Wei and Li Qian looked at him. He fell silent again before continuing, voice muffled. “I’ve always been a disappointment. When the other kids bullied me, I was too afraid to hit back or even cry. Any time my grandma found out, she’d take me along when she went to confront the school, then scold me when we got back home. She’d take me to buy yogurt, chocolate, candy, and Qingfeng’s veggie buns. But then at home, she wouldn’t take a single bite. She left all of it for me. I’d put it to her mouth, and she’d only have a tiny nibble.

“As a kid, I always told myself that when I grew up and made lots of money, it would be my turn to take care of her. I thought I’d buy her yogurt, chocolate, and buns, but…she didn’t live to see that day.”

Something in his words struck a chord with Li Qian. Tears started to form in her eyes, but Guo Changcheng didn’t notice. It was like he was talking to himself.

“One night she passed away in her sleep. No one knew. The next morning, she didn’t get up, so I went to wake her, and found…found her. For the next few years, I always dreamed of her. When I wasn’t in school, I’d dream she was pushing me every day, telling me, ‘Go study, study well.’ I finally returned to school. Sometimes, when I got a good grade, she smiled at me. When my grades fell, she sighed and looked tense. Then I finally got to university.”

Guo Changcheng looked as wilted as a frost-beaten eggplant. Shen Wei couldn’t help patting his head.

Smiling shyly at him, Guo Changcheng said, “I received my letter of admission later than everyone else. I was in the third round of acceptances; everyone else had already accepted their offers—it was September by then. That night was the last time I dreamed of her. She told me, ‘You’re all grown up now. Grandma can rest in peace. I’ll be leaving.’ When I asked her where she was going, she just shook her head and said it was the place dead people should go, and the living shouldn’t ask about it. It’s been years, but I haven’t dreamed of her again. Not even once. My uncle said she reincarnated.”

Silent tears rolled down Li Qian’s cheeks, like beads from a broken string.

“What I mean is…” Guo Changcheng tugged foolishly at his hair. He’d been able to say so much for once out of sympathy. He was on the verge of admiring himself. “Come on, don’t cry. When my grandma first passed away, I thought my world was collapsing too. I remember thinking, now I’ll never get the chance to be a filial grandson again, so what’s the point of studying and working hard? Back then, I would even have traded my life for hers, but…” He sighed. “Anyway, I’m not good with words. I just mean don’t be sad. Our relatives who have passed away are still watching over us.”

It would've been better if he'd stopped talking while he was ahead. At his last sentences, Li Qian began to shake and sob loudly. It was quickly clear that she was unable to stop, so badly out of it that her hands and feet were twitching unconsciously. Shen Wei hurried to get the doctor. Guo Changcheng, who had never seen someone so utterly devastated, could only stand aside helplessly.

The clinic doctor normally only prescribed medication for colds or diarrhea. He didn't have any experience injecting sedatives. Seeing the state Li Qian was in, he immediately ordered, "Transfer her to the Second Hospital!"

All Guo Changcheng could do was accompany Shen Wei and help take Li Qian from the clinic to an actual hospital. Sitting in Shen Wei's car, holding a girl he didn't know who was practically at death's door, Guo Changcheng watched Dragon City University fade into the distance through the window. More than ever, he felt that working just sucked.

Shen Wei wasn't Li Qian's advisor, her guidance counselor, or someone responsible for overseeing her political ideals. As someone who'd simply taught her in an elective, he had truly gone above and beyond—or at least Guo Changcheng had never seen such a good professor at his own sad little school. It was Shen Wei who checked Li Qian in at the hospital and paid up front for the visit. Once she'd been admitted to the emergency room, Guo Changcheng even saw Shen Wei in the hallway calling his colleagues to get contact information for Li Qian's family.

His tone remained even and scrupulously polite, but Guo Changcheng could still tell there was a problem. While Shen Wei was on the phone with Li Qian's father, he kept stopping mid-sentence, as if constantly interrupted. Eventually, Shen Wei lowered his phone helplessly, then pinched the bridge of his nose and dialed another number.

Call after call after call went exactly the same way.

As Guo Changcheng looked on, he thought that Shen Wei didn't look like a professor informing a student's parents about her health but like a petitioner begging for action. He was speaking to Li Qian's birth parents, her uncles, and her aunties, and every one passed her along like a hot potato. Ultimately, not a single person said they'd come to see her.

Even Guo Changcheng was a little angry. *What the fuck?*

Domestic woes were outside the jurisdiction of even an honest, upright official. If that was simply what her family was like, there was nothing Shen Wei could do about it. After the final call ended, he folded his arms and leaned against the wall, frowning.

The professor had broad shoulders, a slim waist, and long, slender legs. His shirt cuffs were securely buttoned, and a pair of rimless glasses perched on his nose. All in all, he looked like a perfume ad model, exuding an air of forbidden sex appeal.

He stood there quietly for some time. Guo Changcheng half expected him to open his mouth and curse, but Shen Wei still said nothing. Eventually, although his brow was still furrowed, he looked up and smiled amicably at Guo Changcheng. "Thank you, Officer xiao-Guo. You've worked hard today. Why don't you head on back, and I'll take care of things here. I don't want to get in the way of your other work."

"I… I don't have any other work," Guo Changcheng mumbled. His eyes happened to meet Daqing's as the cat was trying hard to stick his head out of his bag.

Under that dark green gaze, he suddenly blurted, “Director Zhao just told me to follow her. He didn’t say what exactly he wanted me to investigate and didn’t tell me when I should go back…”

After the burst of resolve that Zhao Yunlan had tricked out of him had faded, Guo Changcheng had come to a realization about the arbitrary task he’d been given. He was slow, not stupid. Tailing a sickly young lady wasn’t some kind of challenging assignment. Director Zhao probably thought he was underfoot and had found some way to get rid of him. It was true that he had no skills and could be nothing but trouble. Only nepotism had gotten him into the SID, and in less than twenty-four hours he’d already messed up more things than he could count. Who would want such useless trash around?

“Your Director Zhao doesn’t think that,” Shen Wei said, his attempt at comfort tinged with exasperation. “Don’t overthink it.”

Guo Changcheng’s depression turned him into a mushroom-shaped storm cloud.

Just then, the doctor came out to inform them that Li Qian had suffered too much shock; that, combined with relentless negative emotions, malnutrition, and low blood sugar, had resulted in her extreme reaction. He had already administered a sedative, so she was asleep. He suggested that she stay at the hospital for observation. Shen Wei had no choice but to fill out yet more paperwork for an overnight stay.

The unlikely trio—two humans and a cat—stayed with Li Qian until the sun set heavily in the west, and still not a single family member came to see her.

“Shen-laoshi, does her family not care about her?” Guo Changcheng asked quietly.

Shen Wei didn’t know what to say. He only sighed.

Guo Changcheng sat at Li Qian’s bedside and suddenly grasped why she was so sad, why her emotional reaction was so extreme, why she’d sobbed to the point of convulsions and had even tried to jump off a building. Perhaps the only person in the world who’d loved her was no longer there. From now on, there was no one to care about her happiness, anger, sadness, or joy. No one would be watching over her, encouraging her to test her wings while also wishing she could stay a little longer in the nest.

That was how night found them when it fell.

Chapter 7

"RIGHT HERE. Rewind it."

After parting ways with Guo Changcheng, Zhao Yunlan drove back to 4 Bright Avenue. Once there, he headed straight in and watched the security footage from the intersection outside DCU's main entrance three times, start to finish.

By daylight, the office looked far bleaker. The only person on duty in the criminal investigation unit was a female officer who might have been in her twenties. A simple ponytail highlighted her pretty forehead and a clear complexion that was accentuated with light makeup. She was in uniform—at least from the waist up. Her lower body was covered by a blanket, and she sat very still in her seat. All that kept her from looking like she was convalescing was the rosiness in her face.

Half-closed eyes and a lazy expression made it seem like she might drift off at any moment, but her hands were working busily. The blanket on her lap was large enough that one edge reached the floor. When Zhao Yunlan accidentally stepped on the trailing edge, the other side of the blanket slid up. For a moment, it revealed the tip of a python tail, which quickly withdrew. The woman's attention remained fixed on the security footage. Without looking, she reached down absentmindedly to adjust the blanket.

The nameplate on the corner of her desk read "Zhu Hong."

The security footage wasn't very clear. Some sort of magnetic field had caused interference, so the recording stopped and started erratically, and sometimes bursts of static obscured the video. What could be seen wasn't terribly revealing, since the murder had taken place in the small alley by the school's side entrance and the camera was filming the intersection outside the main gate. It caught only the brief moment when Li Qian and the victim, Lu Ruomei, had passed each other on University Street.

The footage timestamp put it at 10:20 p.m. the previous night. Things played out just as Li Qian had described: she left the school and crossed the road to a small supermarket, went inside, and came out after five minutes. On her way back, she happened to cross paths with Lu Ruomei, at whom she nodded politely. At Zhao Yunlan's request, the footage was now paused just moments later. Lu Ruomei had crossed the street and was about to enter the alleyway.

Li Qian seemed to glance casually at Lu Ruomei. The poor quality of the video made it hard to see nuances in her expression, but what she'd seen in that glance had sent her reeling, staggering back in shock.

Zhu Hong stared at the screen for a while, and then her eyes finally came fully open. The pupils in those otherwise-ordinary almond eyes were inhuman vertical slits; the effect was deeply unsettling. "Is she looking at what's under the streetlight?"

Zhao Yunlan nodded. "Can you make the area around the streetlight any clearer?"

Zhu Hong zoomed in, but it didn't do much. "No. I've tried my best."

"In a few days I'll send you to start a part-time graduate degree. Go upgrade your technical skills."

Zhu Hong patted her lap—what would have been a human woman's thigh. "That would take at least two or three years, and I'm like this once a month. How exactly would I explain being absent so often?"

Without hesitation or batting an eye, Zhao Yunlan said, "You'd tell them it was menstrual cramps, dumbass."

She absorbed this in brief silence, then said, "You're always destroying my romanticized fantasy of you, boss."

"You're the one who has the nerve to fantasize about your boss." Zhao Yunlan lightly pushed down on her head. "Are you trying to lose your bonus?"

Her eyes narrowed even more. A long serpentine tongue flicked out between her lips. "If you take me to bed for just one night, you can stop paying me entirely. I'll work for free."

Zhao Yunlan gave her an artificial smile. "Really?"

Zhu Hong was silent again, struck by the feeling that their shameless boss might really be capable of selling his body for profit.

"Propositioning your boss during work hours…" Zhao Yunlan pointed at her. "Very good, Comrade Zhu Hong. You'll be our department's representative to the Party seminar this year. Get ready to work on your thinking and awareness."

Wishing she'd shut her mouth sooner, Zhu Hong hastily tried to move on. "If whatever's there isn't visible on the footage, it must not want to be seen, except by someone with a third eye. That girl was probably only able to see it because she'd

used the Reincarnation Dial."

"You managed to find something about that old sundial?" Zhao Yunlan asked.

"Mm-hmm—actually, when you mentioned the old sundial this afternoon, it made me think of something." She bent over and took an old, thread-bound account book from a drawer. "I borrowed this from the Netherworld. You can take a good look through it when you have time. Legend has it that the first of the Hallowed Artifacts from the Netherworld is called the Reincarnation Dial. Its base was made from shards of the Three-Life Rock, and the scales on its back were from a kind of black fish found in the Wangchuan River. The fish are three chi, three cun[12] long; their fins are hard as crystal and all point in the same direction."

Zhao Yunlan nodded for her to continue.

Zhu Hong flipped the account book open. "Only the so-called 'Four Hallowed Artifacts of the Netherworld,' including the Reincarnation Dial, are mentioned in here. It doesn't explain where they came from or what became of them, but based on recent events, it seems like they've ended up in the Mortal Realm."

Her tapered fingers slid across the page, and Zhao Yunlan's gaze followed. Under the words "Reincarnation Dial" he saw a little note in a smaller font that said "life lending."

"Life lending?" Zhao Yunlan's brows creased as the unusual new ghost following Li Qian came to mind. "What did you find out about Li Qian? Did anyone around her die recently? Someone who hasn't yet passed their first seven days?"

"Yes," Zhu Hong said. "Li Qian's grandma passed away at the end of August."

Zhao Yunlan leaned back and slowly lit a cigarette. "That must be it, then. No wonder the old lady's soul can appear in broad daylight if the Three-Life Rock is blocking her soul's passage. I wondered why that girl was spewing lies, but borrowing life from the elderly? How could she do such a thing?"

"No, that's not it," said Zhu Hong. "The Reincarnation Dial represents the sun rising in the morning and setting in the evening. Just like how the scales of the black fish in the Wangchuan River only lie in one direction, it's only possible for an older person to borrow time from someone younger, not the other way around. Director Zhao, I think you've misunderstood her."

Zhu Hong reached out a hand. Out of nowhere, a piece of rice paper drifted down and landed in her palm. Li Qian's name was written on it, followed by her birth chart in smaller text, and then two blurry lines. It was hard to make out what exactly was written there, but it was clear that the words had somehow been changed.

"The Netherworld looked into it for me," she said. "Li Qian's date of death was altered, yes, but her life span wasn't lengthened. It was shortened."

Zhao Yunlan arched an eyebrow, mildly surprised.

"Reincarnation Dial, Reincarnation Dial, thrice around the Stone of Three, half your life for half of mine, born apart but die intertwined," Zhu Hong recited, then continued. "It means someone with the Hallowed Reincarnation Artifact can use it to exchange half of their own remaining life to bring back someone who's already dead. After that, when one of them dies, so does the other.

"Two years ago, Li Qian's grandma was coming to the end of her life. That was most likely when the girl used half of her own life to bring her back. After you called, I dug into her background. Li Qian's address is registered locally, but before that, she

and her grandma lived in the countryside. I called the local village officials, and they told me Li Qian was raised by her grandma. Her parents were always busy with work out of town and never really went back. And what's more, Li Qian has a younger brother. This was all back when the one-child policy was at its strictest, so…you know."

In a family that valued sons over daughters, where the parents desperately wanted a son but didn't want to pay the fine for exceeding the birth limit, the daughter they already had became invisible. Everyone pretended she didn't exist.

Zhu Hong continued, "The village head said the old lady had a sudden stroke two years ago. No one thought she'd make it, but she had a miraculous recovery, just with some side effects. She was later diagnosed with Alzheimer's—what used to be called elderly dementia. I think it was probably caused by nerve damage from the stroke. At first, she was just forgetful, but it kept getting worse. She began to have trouble recognizing faces, and her intellectual capacity declined.

"Then, six months later, Li Qian was accepted into her master's program here in the city. Her parents had no choice but to bring the aging grandmother and their kid here."

"So this 'life for life' probably happened when Li Qian's grandma was sick." Zhao Yunlan flicked his cigarette. "Somewhere back in her hometown, she came across that ancient heirloom, passed down through the generations. It all adds up, but I don't see why she can't talk about it. Why did she need to lie to me?"

"Perhaps there were extenuating circumstances." Zhu Hong spun her chair around with her wrist on the armrest, split-pupiled gaze coming to rest on Zhao Yunlan. The frightening eyes of a cold-blooded creature somehow seemed unusually warm and gentle on her face. "Think about it. If there were someone in this world you loved enough that you'd sacrifice half of your life for theirs, how would you feel if they then started vanishing from your life again?"

Zhao Yunlan's forehead creased. He seemed unmoved, as if still unconvinced. In the face of such a heartrending story, he was not only untouched but examining it for cracks, as if he wouldn't rest until he found something suspicious. Zhu Hong had to wonder which of them was the real cold-blooded one. She sighed quietly.

With a shrug, Zhao Yunlan said, "Okay, Miss Zhu. Lay it out for me."

"Li Qian did a lot of online shopping. I've looked through her purchase history. Almost all the things she bought were health products for the elderly. She didn't have a lot of money to spare, and most of it was earned through tutoring or helping her advisor. Other girls spend far more than that on clothes or makeup, but she rarely bought anything for herself. That alone makes me think she's a good kid. If it's clear that she has nothing to do with the case and she doesn't want to talk about some things, then just leave her be. Don't keep pushing her."

"Material goods don't prove anything," Zhao Yunlan countered. "Sometimes you buy things to make up for not caring for someone anymore…"

He trailed off at Zhu Hong's expression, which said, *You cold-blooded, heartless man* as clearly as any words.

"Fine," he said. "Let's pretend it happened like that. But if she gave half of her life to the old lady, why is she still walking around while the old lady's dead?"

"In a situation like this, it's possible that an accident happened. The old lady may have passed even though her life span wasn't up," said Zhu Hong. "Lin Jing sent

me the list of spirits that went missing yesterday. I checked—she's not on it. She's just floating around out there, and it's very likely the Netherworld doesn't even know yet. If her soul is connected to a living human through the Reincarnation Dial, that might be how she got past the reapers."

Zhao Yunlan considered that. "Mmm."

"What is it?" Zhu Hong asked.

"I just had a thought. I don't know if you noticed, but Li Qian and Lu Ruomei have a very similar build at first glance. Similar hairstyles too. If a stranger saw them from behind, it'd be almost impossible to tell them apart. Then yesterday, they happened to be dressed the same way, and Lu Ruomei just *happened* to die after they crossed paths. Think about it! There must still be some trace of a Hallowed Artifact on Li Qian from the Reincarnation Dial. And if the grandmother really can evade the reapers, maybe the escaped ghosts think…"

"You're saying that Hunger Ghost might have been after Li Qian all along!"

Zhao Yunlan put out his cigarette and grabbed his cell phone from his pocket. "It's almost dark, and I only left our new useless little thing there with Li Qian. I have to get over there."

"The intern who fainted from fright on his first day?"

Zhao Yunlan gave her an exasperated look, not wanting to discuss it. He was about to leave when he remembered something. "Oh, right. Where's the message from the Soul-Executing Emmissary? Give it to me."

Zhu Hong tilted her chin toward the corner of the desk, too afraid to touch what he was asking for.

It was a small pamphlet. The outside was pitch black, with the words "To the hands of the Guardian: A Lone Soul Sends Notice" written in cinnabar. The interior was an exquisite satin. It opened with a few lines of polite but wordy pleasantries, then briefly mentioned the Hunger Ghost's escape before finally getting to its main point: "Tonight at midnight, this one will pay you a visit. Deepest apologies for the disruption."

The whole message was written in neat calligraphy with long, slender strokes. It was practically a work of art.

Zhao Yunlan flipped open the letter. Frightened, Zhu Hong edged her chair away.

The Soul-Executing Emissary had come into existence in the depths of the Netherworld, but he was not a ghost immortal, nor was he subject to the Ten Yanluo Courts.[13] Legend said he had originally been a mere wisp of fiendish energy from the darkest bowels of the Nine Hells. But from this inauspicious beginning, in a rare stroke of serendipity, he evolved to attain a physical form.

He wielded the Soul-Executing Blade, and gods, humans, or any other being, whether from the thirty-three levels of Heaven above or the eighteen levels of Hell below, could be executed by that blade if found guilty. Deities and demons alike bowed their heads to him, and all beings feared him…all but Zhao Yunlan.

Whether he was thick-skinned or boneheaded or just missing reflex tendons[14] others had, Zhao Yunlan not only failed to fear the Emissary but found him gentle and refined with a good personality. His only shortcoming was that, whether speaking or writing, the Emmissary's language was just a bit archaic—too refined and flowery.

Zhao Yunlan could tell Zhu Hong was uneasy, so he quickly skimmed the "Lone Soul's Notice" and stuffed it into his bag. "If there's nothing else, you can go home. Leave everything for Wang Zheng on the night shift. Now, you won't have legs again for a few days. You could slip down just hitting the brakes, and it's inconvenient for you to go anywhere. So once you leave work, try not to fuck around. Make sure to get some rest. And oh, right—reach out to Lin Jing for me before you go. If he's finished up what the Netherworld wanted him to do, tell him not to have too much fun and to get back quickly. What is there to do in the Netherworld, anyway?"

As soon as Zhu Hong heard that she didn't need to stay behind and greet the Soul-Executing Emissary, she nodded as if a weight had lifted.

"I'm heading out, then." Zhao Yunlan strode out, dialing Guo Changcheng's number.

When Guo Changcheng realized it was his boss calling, he instinctively stood at attention.

"Why did it take you so long to pick up?" Zhao Yunlan was already worrying. "Is everything okay over there?"

Guo Changcheng was too tongue-tied to speak. It was weird—that morning, he'd managed to speak directly to his kind-seeming boss, but now that Zhao Yunlan was speaking through a phone, that bravery was reduced to crumbs. As with many socially awkward individuals, he found phone calls far more terrifying than speaking face-to-face.

His breathing came faster and faster until Zhao Yunlan started to think answering the phone could frighten him into a heart attack. After listening to a minute of breathless stammering, Director Zhao sighed. "Is anyone there with you? If so, give them the phone. And if not, give it to Daqing."

Guo Changcheng silently handed the phone to Shen Wei.

Fortunately, Shen-laoshi was reliable. He offered Zhao Yunlan a concise explanation of how they'd taken Li Qian to the hospital, including the hospital name and room number. Then he asked, "What, is Li Qian's situation still—" Crackly static cut him off mid-sentence. "Hello?"

It sounded like Zhao Yunlan had said something, but Shen Wei couldn't make out a single word through the static. He went to the window, seemingly in search of a better signal, but where Guo Changcheng couldn't see, he gently opened the curtain to look out. Still showing every sign of being confused, he said, "What was that? Hello? Can you still hear me?"

This time Zhao Yunlan heard him clearly and had just enough time to snap out, "Fuck, get out of there! Right now!"

Shen Wei reflexively narrowed his eyes as a black shadow darted across the reflection of his night-black pupils. In the next moment, the room was plunged into absolute darkness. The glass next to Shen Wei shattered, and Zhao Yunlan's cat let out a sharp yowl and jumped up. A gust of wind blew past the side of Shen Wei's face, leaving a foul stench in its wake—something that reeked of decay, with the pungency of blood.

Zhao Yunlan seemed to have said something else, but it was unintelligible. Utter chaos broke out in the room. The cat was still yowling over the noise of things crashing into each other. Then a loud clash rang out as something flew through the air and slammed into a chair, knocking it over. Shen Wei backed up half a step to get out of the way, and the call dropped entirely.

He maximized the phone's brightness and shined the light around. An unfamiliar voice said, "Be careful!"

It was Daqing who had knocked the chair over, and he was the one speaking now. Poor panicked Guo Changcheng had managed to trip over the toppled chair and had landed on his backside with his limbs in the air.

Shen Wei reached behind himself into the corner of the room and found a mop. Grabbing it, he thrust the wooden handle forward while swiftly leaning back. With a teeth-grating crash, a black shadow flew over his head at great speed. There was a sudden weight on the mop as the handle was chopped into two.

The black shape flitted past, as quick and silent as if it really were nothing but a shadow. It was too fast to make out clearly, and it headed straight for Li Qian, who was still lying on the bed and completely unaware of any of this, thanks to the sedative.

By now their vision was adjusting to the darkness. In the cell phone's dim light, Shen Wei got a good look. The thing's mouth gaped wider than ninety degrees, giving its head the appearance of a sliced-open watermelon.

Guo Changcheng didn't even have time to pass out. He could only stare, eyes huge and mouth hanging open. His heart rate hadn't even picked up, but his mind had gone blank as a whiteboard. His blood all rushed to his extremities, and his skyrocketing blood pressure made his head feel as if it had doubled in size.

There was only a voice inside wildly yelling, *What is that? What* is *that?!*

That shadow was revealed to have a human shape. Its long body and sticklike limbs resembled a skeleton's, but it had a massive belly that bulged out terrifyingly. Its arms had become a pair of large sickles. As it roared soundlessly, they slashed down ruthlessly toward Li Qian's abdomen.

Belatedly, Guo Changcheng's scream found its way out of his throat. He gave three shrieks in quick succession: "Ah… Ahhhhh… Ahhhhhhh—!"

Shen Wei's expression darkened as he took a brisk step forward. But before he could act, a human figure was suddenly interposed between the shadow and Li Qian.

It was an old woman who had appeared out of nowhere. She was stocky, with a laughable fake hair bun perched on her head. After materializing out of thin air, she flung her arms as wide as possible. Her round body stretched out like a clumsy old hen as she desperately tried to shield the girl on the bed.

Quick as lightning, Shen Wei stepped back as if he hadn't moved. No one noticed as he hefted the metal chair that Daqing had knocked over and hurled it at the shadow.

The chair smashed directly into the shadow's body, ripping it in half. The creature let out what sounded like a scream of rage.

The split halves of its body were still connected by something resembling sticky strands of lotus root, hanging to the side and swaying. Then bubbles of all sizes began to form at those points of connection, as though it were a pot about to boil

over. Like a monster from a persistent nightmare, the two halves shook violently. Horrifying noises came from its mouth as its halves started to fuse into one.

"It's growing back together! It's growing back together again!" Guo Changcheng yelled pointlessly. He was either adding to the chaos or…well, adding to the chaos.

Shen Wei had no choice but to retrieve the chair from where it had ricocheted off the headboard, then brandish it fiercely at the monster. The mild-mannered Shen-laoshi, it turned out, was anything but mild when it came to fighting. Accuracy, steadiness, fierceness—he possessed them all in spades. While everyone around him was still frozen in fear and unsure what to do, he'd already gained the upper hand, striking first and smashing the thing into seven or eight pieces.

Finally, face un-flushed and breathing unaffected, he tossed the chair aside.

Silence reigned in the room for two full seconds.

Then Daqing sprang to the head of Li Qian's bed. Whiskers quivering, he said, "Don't just stand there! Hurry up and go. You can't beat a Hunger Ghost to death with a chair. You were lucky just now because the room's full of yang energy. Once you've really angered this thing, it won't be fun."

Shen Wei looked up. He and the cat had a brief staredown.

"That's right, you're not hallucinating," Daqing said, expression solemn. "I *am* the one talking and you really did just batter a Hunger Ghost to pieces, so don't give me any bullshit about how 'one does not speak of the supernatural.' Get moving!"

Whether it was due to mental fortitude or something else, Daqing hadn't even finished talking before Shen Wei bent down and hoisted Li Qian onto his back. Valiantly, he even asked, "What about that old lady just now?"

"She'll follow. You don't need to worry about her. She's a new ghost, not a living person."

"Oh," Shen Wei said and put atheism behind him. "Officer xiao-Guo, keep up!"

Guo Changcheng was still gawking, his neck stiff as he contorted himself into an awkward shape.

Shen Wei, carrying Li Qian, raised his voice sharply. "Officer xiao-Guo!"

Struggling to get his limbs under him, Guo Changcheng got up as if he'd just woken from a dream. "I… I-I-I…"

"Enough with the 'I's! Open the door for me!"

By this point, Guo Changcheng's brain was fried from sheer overload, so he was only capable of obeying. At Shen Wei's order, he stumbled to push the room's door open.

There wasn't a single thread of light in the hallway outside. The doctors and nurses on duty seemed to have evaporated from the mortal world. Every single room was empty. The whole floor had become a ghost town.

The cat raced ahead, more nimbly than one might imagine from his size. Shen Wei followed carrying Li Qian, leaving Guo Changcheng no choice but to bring up the rear.

Their footsteps echoed all around the empty hallway. A window must have been left open somewhere, because there was a constant eerie breeze blowing around them. It chilled the back of Guo Changcheng's neck and slowly woke his brain from its state of frozen terror.

He couldn't shake the feeling that there was something behind him.

Chapter 8

FEELING OR NO FEELING, Guo Changcheng didn't dare turn around. Having been raised by the elderly for much of his life, he had been fed a lot of superstitious beliefs, including the common one that said to never look back when walking at night. Doing so would extinguish the lamp on each shoulder, and then monsters would come get you.

He was doing his best to keep himself under control, but the scene that had just played out was still vivid in his mind. The more he thought about it, the more petrified he became, as if that thing were about to catch up to him. It didn't look like lamps on his shoulders would keep it at bay. With a belly so engorged it looked pregnant and arms like a mantis' pincers… Guo Changcheng touched his neck. With a head as delicate as his, the thing could decapitate five of him at once without breaking a sweat.

His brain then replayed the image of the corpse in that narrow alley. Guo Changcheng hadn't seen the actual scene of the crime, but from photos, he knew how it had looked: that young woman on the ground, her abdomen cut open.

Look back… Don't look back… Look back…

Guo Changcheng wiped away cold sweat and found himself walking faster. He quickly caught up with Shen Wei, who had Li Qian on his back.

Guo Changcheng had never been a confrontational person. For him, running away was as natural as a cat eating fish or a dog eating meat. It was practically part of his genetic makeup, and right now, his genes were telling him that the safest place was between Shen Wei and the black cat. Bringing up the rear was way too scary.

But at that moment, Shen Wei suddenly stopped walking. Li Qian seemed to have stirred, but she hadn't woken up completely, so she started sliding down his shoulders. He had to stop to adjust his hold on her.

Guo Changcheng could have overtaken him, but for some reason, he instead came to a halt. In addition to not rushing ahead, he maintained his forward-facing position. Stiffly, without turning his head, he twisted his body sideways to take a quick glance back, then leaned against the wall.

It was a kind of protective, alert pose for the sake of the people in front of him. Guo Changcheng had finally remembered something. *"I'm a police officer,"* he said to himself. *"I'm a police officer, I'm a police officer, I'm a police officer…"*

He kept repeating it in his head, looping it again and again like he was a voice recorder, as if enough repetition would give him some sense of honor and courage.

Unfortunately, the words "I'm a police officer" weren't enough to ward off evil. It accomplished nothing but wasting his breath. He was still on the verge of losing his mind from fear.

As he silently chanted, his vision began to blur. He belatedly put a hand to his face an instant before meeting Shen Wei's shocked gaze…which was how Guo Changcheng realized he had actually started crying. Was it any surprise that Shen Wei was shocked? An hour earlier, Shen-laoshi had still been an ordinary university professor. But in the course of that hour, he had witnessed such bizarre things

firsthand: a murderous black shadow, a talking cat, and a police officer who had been reduced to tears right in front of him!

The truth was, Guo Changcheng himself didn't fully understand why he was crying. But then came the swift and unexpected realization that crying was the best possible option for venting his emotions and lessening his fear. It was certainly more useful than endlessly repeating "I'm a police officer."

Taking a deep breath, he began to wail in earnest. But with the wailing came brave words. "H-hurry and run! I-I'll bring up the rear! I-I will protect you guys…!"

Shen-laoshi said nothing. It seemed very probable that he was numb from everything he'd seen, and that was why a hint of a smile flickered in his eyes.

Maintaining their peculiar formation, the black cat rushed to the stairs and raced down toward the first floor. The two men with the unconscious girl were right behind him. Shen Wei was still holding Guo Changcheng's phone to use as a flashlight, and as they ran, its light swept across the corner of the stairwell. Before Shen Wei could make out what the light had revealed, an inhuman scream exploded out of Guo Changcheng.

Even running flat out, Guo Changcheng was fully capable of screaming and crying. Clearly, despite the fact that he was a recluse, Officer xiao-Guo's lung capacity was excellent.

Shen Wei took a closer look. What lay in the corner was a child—but no. No, it was more accurately a fetus, a tiny thing even smaller than a newborn baby, probably premature. Beneath the sparse hair on its scalp, its head was like a squashed ball, broken open in places to reveal the ruin of its skull and brain. Its features were crooked, and its empty mouth agape. It lay there quietly like a medical specimen, staring at them with warped, vacant pupils.

"What are you screaming for?" Daqing admonished loudly. "This is a hospital—of course it's packed full of yin energy. There are plenty more where this one came from. Don't act like some country bumpkin who hasn't seen the world."

"Wh-what *is* that?" Guo Changcheng managed.

"A little ghost of a fetus that was aborted before it was born." Daqing swiped at the tiny ghost. It vanished, letting out a cry like that of a kitten. "Get moving! The Hunger Ghost is right behind us!"

In a previous life, Daqing must have been a doom-saying crow, not a cat. His words were still hanging in the air when that rotten stench hit Guo Changcheng and Shen Wei's noses. They both picked up the pace. While talking, they'd made it from the second-floor inpatient area to the first floor, only to hear pounding footsteps behind them.

"What *now*?!" Guo Changcheng asked tearfully, his head somehow unusually clear. "Isn't the Hunger Ghost like a shadow? How can it have such heavy footsteps?"

"I already fucking said, this is a hospital! There're all kinds of things here—the cycle of life and death plays out here every day, not to mention the impurities of all kinds!" Daqing yelled. "Also, are you discriminating against overweight people? We fatties aren't thieves! We don't go around taking advantage of others! What's wrong with being overweight? Being overweight is fine!"

Shen Wei had lost count of how many times he'd been left speechless that night. He couldn't begin to imagine what Zhao Yunlan's work environment was like with employees like these.

Despite having someone on his back, Shen Wei didn't seem tired at all. He was still breathing easily. Now, seeing that the cat was about to explode, he could only coax, "Come now, you two. Don't fight. Where's the exit, kitty?"

Daqing's explosion was undeterred. "Don't call me something so stupid, mortal!"

"Divine cat…" Shen Wei smoothly switched gears. "It would appear we've been down this hallway already. Might the divine cat have some wisdom to share?"

Daqing slammed on his brakes, coming to a stop so abrupt that Shen Wei nearly stepped on him. Only a frantic sidestep prevented it. Guo Changcheng, meanwhile, slumped against the wall like a dead dog, hyperventilating and letting out the occasional tearful hiccup.

Daqing's ears pricked up as he tilted his flat face to the side. In the cell phone's dim light, his feline eyes glowed eerily. After some consideration, he turned back and calmly said, "We've been going in circles."

This time, the heavy footsteps approached from up ahead. Something seemed to be squirming inside the blurry shadows on the wall. On closer inspection, it was dozens of intertwined, humanoid shadows…shadows locked in constant, writhing struggle. They screamed soundlessly, ripping and biting at one another but eternally joined…

In this place, lives came to bitter ends every single day. Those who had lived those lives could only wander its corridors aimlessly, unable to leave. They were consumed by envy for the living, greedy for the scent of life but unable to approach.

Such resentment, such despair…

"Run!" Daqing felt like he'd been yelling the same instruction constantly throughout the evening. All he needed was a starting pistol and he'd be ready to officiate a track meet.

The three humans and the cat managed to stumble into a small storage room. Guo Changcheng, the last one inside, slammed the door shut as if his life depended on it. He plastered his entire body against the rusty-smelling door, holding it closed until the lock clicked. Only then did he finally have time to snort back the snot bubble that had escaped along with his tears, unable to believe he was really still alive. He'd just felt a ghostly hand on his neck, and the dark chill of the touch seemed to linger.

Shen Wei set Li Qian down to the side and hurried to join him. Between them, they moved all kinds of things in front of the door as a makeshift barricade.

But before they could even catch their breath, there was a forceful impact against the door from the other side. The clang was loud enough to drive Guo Changcheng to his knees.

There were two or three more powerful blows, and then silence…until there came the sound of sharp nails scratching at the metal door.

Guo Changcheng had slid all the way down the door, but he was so startled by the noise that he flung himself away as if electrocuted, goosebumps rising all over his skin. Crying, he turned to Shen Wei. "I haven't even gotten my first month's salary yet! Can't I at least *see* the money I won't even get to spend before I die?"

Thinking it would be somewhat impolite to laugh under the circumstances, Shen Wei adjusted his glasses to hide his amusement.

Guo Changcheng kept sobbing. “Shen-laoshi, do you have any unfulfilled wishes?”

Perhaps hoping to ease Guo Changcheng’s terror, Shen Wei gave the question careful consideration before nodding. “I do.”

Through tears, Guo Changcheng choked out, “Like what?”

“There is someone I met only by chance. There are no connections between us; to him, I must only be a stranger with whom he’s exchanged a few words.” Shen Wei spoke gently against the background noise of scratching nails. “But I very much want to see him one more time.”

Chapter 9

THE MAN WAS MAYBE thirty years old—a guy with an average build, wearing wide-framed glasses and a string of sandalwood Buddhist prayer beads. Once out of his car, the first thing he did was fish his phone out of his pocket, turn on the camera, and aim it at his own face with the hospital in frame behind him.

There in the darkness, he began recording. "Special mission: September 1, 20XX, 9:23 p.m. Baota Road East, Dongcheng District, Dragon City Second Hospital," he muttered. "Mission executor: Lin Jing. Over."

A black SUV screeched up behind him. Zhao Yunlan tore off his seat belt and leaped out. "Unclog your brain and follow me, quickly! We're up to our ears in trouble and you're standing around taking selfies!"

"Oh," said the man called Lin Jing.

"How the hell did I land myself in this situation?" Zhao Yunlan seethed. "Why is my entire team made up of non-humans and dumbasses?"

The whole hospital was shrouded in a black haze, and its immediate vicinity was deserted. None of the bustling passersby on Baota Road East even seemed to see it.

Zhao Yunlan dialed Guo Changcheng and Shen Wei's numbers, neither of which were in service. Cursing to himself, he kicked the front door of the hospital open. Black fog rushed toward him as he intruded, but he barely broke stride even as he drew a palm-sized dagger from under his pant leg, sidestepped, and slashed the shadow in two.

More black shadows came racing out of the hospital. Lin Jing, right on Zhao Yunlan's heels, pulled out a gun and started firing, picking them off without a single wasted shot or a hitch in the Buddhist scriptures flowing off his tongue.

"Is there something seriously unlucky about our useless newbie's birth chart?" Zhao Yunlan looked at all the shadows clogging the hallway. It was like entering a drainpipe blocked with hair. "At the school he attracted a resentful spirit, and now he's attracting ghosts at a hospital. If you dropped him into *Investiture of the Gods*, he'd just be a Soul-Beckoning Flag."[15]

"'Form is emptiness,'"[16] Lin Jing recited, then he said, "I'll conduct a ritual for him later."

"'Form,' my ass! Either speak normally or shut up!"

Serenely, Lin Jing continued with his recitations… *"'Emptiness is form.'"*

"Fuck your mother's second uncle!" Zhao Yunlan snarled.

After a moment of silence, Lin Jing pleaded sincerely, "Boss…my mother's second uncle has long since passed, so please forsake these empty forms of wrath and lust."

Zhao Yunlan had nothing to say in response.

His loathing for work could be blamed directly on having people like this as coworkers.

With a deep breath, he tucked his little dagger between his teeth and took out a yellow paper talisman and his lighter. Holding the talisman aloft, he lit it. The tiny flame immediately swelled to a ravenous blaze.

One shadow was sucked in before it could escape. The flame, having fed on a dead spirit, reached a meter in height and surged down the corridor, swallowing the countless little ghosts that didn't manage to escape. It crashed through like a dragon of flame, consuming everything in its path with the force of a gas explosion.

"Amitabha, our Buddha is merciful…" Lin Jing murmured.

Zhao Yunlan's expression was dark. "Enough already."

In less than a minute, nothing remained but a pea-sized flame at the end of the hall, as if the towering inferno had been an illusion as ephemeral as fireworks. Zhao Yunlan strode over, bent down, and lit a cigarette with the tiny flame. Cigarette between his lips, he beckoned to Lin Jing and pushed open the door in front of him. They headed deeper inside.

Meanwhile, the trio taking refuge in the storage room were unaware that salvation was close at hand. As the scratching at the door grew sharper and more frantic, so did Guo Changcheng's breathing. He was teetering on the edge of a breakdown.

Shen Wei could only ignore him. Looking down at the cat, he asked, "What should we do now?"

Daqing was plainly a cat wise in the ways of the world. Calmly, he answered, "I'm sure your call told Director Zhao enough about the situation. No need to worry. We just have to hold out a little longer until he comes to save us."

Shen Wei frowned. "By himself? Is that safe? How will he get in?"

That was the part the professor focused on? Daqing's tail gave a tired swish. "Don't worry. He's got thick skin and tough flesh. A handful of puny little ghosts won't be able to chew through him."

Leaning against the wall, Shen Wei thought about it. "Can't we figure out a way to save ourselves?"

Daqing glanced up at him, a little confused. This Shen-laoshi was far too calm.

"How?" He began to list off what they had to work with. "A mortal; useless trash; someone sedated to the gills; and me, a mascot. Even if the four of us offered ourselves up in a steamer basket, do you think we'd be more than an appetizer for the Hunger Ghost?"

Shakily, Guo Changcheng asked, "Didn't Shen-laoshi smash it into pieces with that chair earlier?"

"Earlier it was famished and desperate to feed, so it didn't watch its back," Daqing said impatiently. "You two are young men, so you have strong yang energy. That weakened it enough for you to get the upper hand. But with the overabundance of yin energy in this hospital, it'll be like it chugged several cases of energy drinks while chasing us. It could even be suffering from *over*-nourishment by now—oh, fuck, *another* one?"

The cat was cut off by a child's shrill laughter coming from the corner. Shen Wei looked over and saw a small girl around five or six years old with a sickly, pale complexion. She was squatting on the floor letting out creepy peals of laughter as she merrily grabbed at the black cat's tail.

Before Shen Wei could check to see whether this little ghost had a monstrous face and oversized fangs, a sudden weight settled against his legs. Guo Changcheng was wrapped around them like a koala.

"Save me!" The young officer who had moments ago vowed to protect Shen Wei was now holding on for dear life. He was shaking, his face a puddle of snot and tears, but was still able to yell something he'd been holding in all day. "Ghost! There's a ghost!"

The little ghost had died young enough that her intellect hadn't been fully developed. The mere sight of people was a thrill, and this was a tremendously entertaining development. She let go of Daqing at once and giddily floated over to Guo Changcheng, finding this bear-hugging man highly interesting.

When Guo Changcheng cracked his eyes open and risked a peek down, the girl stuck out her tongue and rolled her eyes back. With her face still tilted upward, her head spun 360 degrees on her neck, leaving it dangling in midair while still connected perilously to her body.

Guo Changcheng's eyes rolled back into his skull a full three times, but he gasped for half a minute without managing to pass out. He seemed to take Shen Wei for a real tree, hugging his legs tightly and attempting to climb. A scream arose from the pit of his stomach. "Ghost! Aaaaaah!"

Shen Wei sighed and held on to the waistband of his pants to keep Guo Changcheng from dragging them down and costing him his dignity. He even managed to see the strange humor of the situation, caught between a Hunger Ghost clawing at the door behind him and a little ghost girl dangling her head in front of him.

By the time Zhao Yunlan was only a dozen meters into the hospital, his watch, Clarity, looked like it had been dyed with blood. The watch's hands deviated from their usual course and started spinning wildly, like a compass needle. But no matter how it tried, it couldn't settle on anything. The sheer number of impurities was interfering too badly.

"Hey, fake monk, my stupid watch is acting up again!" Zhao Yunlan yelled to Lin Jing. "If you've got any tricks, hurry up and use them! We've got people waiting for us to save their lives."

Lin Jing promptly sat cross-legged on the floor. Closing his eyes, he started counting his Buddhist prayer beads. His lips moved steadily as he recited scriptures, for all the world like an old monk meditating, then his eyes snapped back open. "Got it!"

The sandalwood beads in his hand rustled. Face blank, he stood and pointed in one direction, every inch the confident charlatan. "This way."

Zhao Yunlan immediately headed in that direction. "How come you were so fast this time?"

Behind him, Lin Jing spoke in his unique, leisurely way. "They're both young men, so their yang energy is naturally abundant. Even with Daqing's black cat yin energy with them, they stand out from this place's ocean of raging yin energy."

Zhao Yunlan froze. "Only two men? What about the girl?"

"There's a girl? Oh, then she's not with them."

Zhao Yunlan frowned. It was hard for him to say what Guo Changcheng would do in this situation, but Daqing was there. Lazy and gluttonous the cat might be, but he still had some professional ethics. Besides, Shen-laoshi was with them.

"That's not possible," he replied reflexively. "There's no way Shen Wei would leave a student behind." They had only met by chance, but he was certain Shen Wei wasn't the sort of coward who'd abandon his student.

"Who's Shen Wei?" Lin Jing asked. "Isn't the new kid's last name Guo?"

Zhao Yunlan couldn't be bothered to explain. "No one you know."

"Mm-hmm," Lin Jing said. "The last time you brushed me off like this, you were dressed up like a suave asshole going off to see the prettiest girl at your university. Every time you get stingy with details and hide something, it means you've definitely met a beauty. Will you at least tell me if this Shen Wei is a man or a woman?"

"Amitabha, '*form is emptiness*,'" Zhao Yunlan threw back at him darkly.

Lin Jing had nothing to say to that.

Zhao Yunlan entered the dark, narrow hallway and held up his lighter to survey his surroundings. The hallways branched in all directions, like the deathly silent maze of a trapdoor spider's nest. Why did Lin Jing think Li Qian wasn't with Shen Wei and the others? Had they really had a reason to leave the girl behind, or…

Or did they only *think* they'd brought her along with them?

At that moment, in a corner of the storage room, Li Qian's eyes opened.

Chapter 10

GUO CHANGCHENG heard a noise. Turning to look, he saw that Li Qian had gotten up, entirely without assistance. There was something awkward and disjointed about her movements—almost like a marionette. It was indescribably creepy. But she'd just woken up and the drugs she'd been given could still be affecting her, so Guo Changcheng didn't think too much of it. He even let out a sigh of relief. "Li-tongxue, thank god! You're finally awake!"

Li Qian didn't answer. She only stood there, staring at him blankly.

It dawned on Guo Changcheng that something wasn't quite right. "Li-tongxue?" He took a step forward, only to be stopped by Shen Wei's outstretched arm.

And then Li Qian smiled. Her mouth split into an uncanny curve as a strange gurgling came from her throat. The motion of her shoulders was slow and clumsy, as if they'd rusted. Her entire body swayed in place a few times, but just as Guo Changcheng began to wonder if she'd been paralyzed, she rushed forward, inhumanly quick. It was Shen Wei, who'd placed himself between her and Guo Changcheng, whom Li Qian ran into, hitting his chest like a firecracker. She immediately attempted to take a bite out of his shoulder.

The phone's light fell across her face, showing rows of crooked teeth in her gaping mouth. With her nose scrunched up and her eyes so wide that the whites showed all around her irises, she looked like a grotesque fanged monster.

"Oh no! She's been possessed by a malevolent spirit!" Daqing's black fur stood on end. "First she summoned a Hunger Ghost, and now a malevolent spirit?! Shen-laoshi, what is up with your student? Why is she such an impurity magnet?"

Guo Changcheng's head emptied of everything but a faint buzz. Acting on pure instinct, he whacked at Li Qian with both his hands and feet, using all sorts of bizarre techniques—pulling her hair and scratching at her face. He might've even wanted to pounce and sink his teeth into her.

One of his doggy-paddle-style attacks got lucky: he managed to hit her in the face hard enough that her head snapped back. In his wild panic, he even stepped on her a few times. Despite this heroic display, Guo Changcheng carried on in his own idiotic style, yelling through the omnipresent snot and tears. "Don't come near me! Don't come near me! Help! Don't come near me!"

To Shen Wei, caught between them, it seemed the situation could hardly get any more chaotic. He could only push Guo Changcheng away with one hand and fend Li Qian off with the other, twisting her arm behind her. Li Qian seemed completely feral, flailing and biting at everything her mouth could reach. Shen Wei freed one hand to grab her by the back of the neck, then turned and pinned her against the wall, seizing her hands.

Commotion reigned within and without. Inside the storage room there was a strange, hissing girl, a little ghost girl wrapped around the leg of a young officer whose nose and eyes were constantly streaming, and a yelling, cursing black cat; outside, a monster relentlessly clawed at the door.

Even Shen Wei's preternatural calm couldn't keep him from being swept up in the chaos of it all. "Someone get me a rope so I can tie her up," he said.

But everyone was too busy crying or cursing to pay him any attention. Shen Wei was obliged to raise his voice, patience wearing thin as he turned to Guo Changcheng. "Stop crying, Officer xiao-Guo. That little thing doesn't bite. Please come give me a hand."

As if to illustrate his point, the little ghost girl opened her mouth, which had only three teeth left, and chomped down on Guo Changcheng's thigh. Guo Changcheng immediately keened like a dolphin, earning himself a slap on the forehead from the cat, who had jumped onto him.

"Fool, take a closer look!"

Guo Changcheng obediently opened his eyes just a sliver to look down…and realized the little ghost's teeth and hands had gone right through him. She couldn't even touch him!

Li Qian began to struggle harder. Shen Wei was on the verge of a cold sweat from wrangling the useless duo. "Officer xiao-Guo!"

Guo Changcheng scrambled up from the floor and whipped off his own belt. He helped Shen Wei tie Li Qian up, all the while squeezing his legs together to keep his pants from slipping down. It looked as if he were trying to hold in the urge to pee.

Just then, the old lady, who'd been gone for some time, reappeared. She floated off to the side, barely visible and seeming much weaker. She was clearly frantic to touch Li Qian, but her hand kept passing through the girl's body. With each attempt, she became a little more transparent.

Guo Changcheng couldn't help trying to stop her. "Granny…" But his hand went right through her.

When the old lady looked back at him, Guo Changcheng saw her face clearly. She had deep smile lines and pronounced bags under her eyes, and her sparse white hair was poorly secured with a fake bun, revealing an ugly, dry scalp. The wrinkles on her forehead weighed down the corners of her eyes until they drooped, squished into triangles. Her eyeballs were murky.

She seemed desperate to communicate, but no sound came out of her mouth. As her efforts at touching anything proved futile, desperation turned into despair.

But gradually she calmed down. She looked at Li Qian blankly and simply stood there, at a loss for what to do. Finally, soundlessly, she began to cry.

Her tears were as murky as her eyes, like mud-tinged rainwater. Guo Changcheng could only stand there uselessly. He gave Shen-laoshi and Daqing a helpless look, then pointed at Li Qian. "What… What exactly is wrong with her?"

Shen Wei's head was bowed; it was impossible to know what he was thinking. Daqing hmphed. "She's been possessed by something impure. But bugs don't feed when there's no rot. If she's possessed but you're fine, that means she's even worse off than you."

Guo Changcheng couldn't tell if that was praise or insult, but he had no time to ponder it. There was a great screech as a huge hole was ripped through the small door of the storage room, and a mantis-sickle claw reached in!

Shen Wei ducked tidily, pushing Li Qian to the side as he moved. The Hunger Ghost's claw slashed past him, just barely grazing his scalp. Then the door tore completely open, revealing the Hunger Ghost in all its grotesquerie. The thing seemed to have gained a full ton of mass since they'd last seen it.

It threw itself at the living creatures inside the storage room, passing through Li Qian's grandma. The old lady's soul didn't have time to dodge, and the contact vaporized her. Only her shocked, frightened expression seemed to linger.

Daqing roared, "Get out of the way!"

Guo Changcheng fell on his ass as Daqing leaped up to a high place. The cat's body abruptly doubled in size, and his eyes turned to piercing gold, like a little leopard. An inaudible sound wave flowed from his mouth, carrying an invisible energy aimed straight for the Hunger Ghost charging around the tiny room.

The energy was palpable. It sliced past Guo Changcheng's face like a blade, making him fear for the safety of his nose. The Hunger Ghost was hurled into the air and slammed against the wall. In the dim light, Shen Wei and the others could see tiny cracks from the impact.

The Hunger Ghost abruptly stopped moving, like a gecko nailed to the wall. In the next moment, Daqing's body dwindled to its normal kitty size. He stumbled forward a few steps before going still and toppling from his high perch. Shen Wei quickly reached out to catch him.

The black cat looked at him as if on the verge of death. He subconsciously rubbed his face against Shen Wei's hand, then closed his eyes and was still.

Guo Changcheng quaked with terror, sure that the cat had died. It wasn't until he saw the regular rise and fall of his furry belly as Shen Wei smoothed a hand over it that he realized Daqing had only fallen asleep.

"What do we do?" asked Guo Changcheng, dragging himself upright. But before Shen Wei could answer, there was an earth-shattering roar of fury.

Yet again, Guo Changcheng's ass met the floor.

The two of them simultaneously looked toward the flattened Hunger Ghost in shock, only to find that it no longer resembled a dumpling wrapper slapped onto the wall. It had reinflated itself!

Countless globs of shadows like low-grade cotton were being sucked in from the hallway and into the Hunger Ghost's wide mouth. Its stomach ballooned rapidly until its roundness let it roll off the wall.

The Hunger Ghost landed easily on its stick legs, still reminiscent of a huge mantis. It even swayed a little as it walked. Then it shook its head and opened its mouth a full hundred and eighty degrees, like a watermelon cut in half.

As the room filled with a terrifying sound of wind, Guo Changcheng felt his feet sliding forward of their own volition. He looked back, astounded, and realized Shen Wei was getting farther from him by the second.

"I'm being sucked in!" Guo Changcheng's voice changed pitch. Somehow, embroiled in such absolute chaos, a metaphor popped into his head. "It's sucking me up like jelly in a vacuum pack! I'm going to be eaten!"

With great difficulty, Guo Changcheng twisted and began to doggy-paddle in midair, movements contorted. As he tried to reach for Shen Wei, jumbled words

spilled out of his mouth. “I… I’m a police officer! I’m going to be eaten! I’m a police…”

He’d completely forgotten about using those very words to encourage himself. But it appeared that even the Hunger Ghost thought this particular morsel was too noisy. It roared again.

It was as if an invisible hand clamped around Guo Changcheng’s neck, abruptly cutting off his voice. He shook his head desperately, neck extended as he instinctively clawed at it. Veins protruded on the back of his hand, and a horrific sound came from his throat, like a leaky old bellows.

Then Shen Wei grabbed his hand and held on with such unexpected strength that Guo Changcheng feared he might be ripped apart.

Daqing was unconscious. Li Qian was still struggling on the floor, eyes glazed over. The Hunger Ghost was sizing them all up as prey while an array of little ghosts leered at them. Things could hardly be worse.

Then a whistle suddenly carved the darkness open, stabbing at their eardrums.

An expression of utter horror crossed the little ghost girl’s face. At some point, she had hidden herself in the corner; now she screamed silently, dove into the floor, and disappeared.

A moment later, a pitch-black dagger cut through the air. It flew between Guo Changcheng and the Hunger Ghost as though cutting an invisible rope. Something seemed to shove the Hunger Ghost, slamming it against the wall. The force pulling Guo Changcheng stopped so abruptly that momentum sent him crashing into Shen Wei.

He fell to the floor, landing on his back, and might have brought Shen-laoshi down with him…had someone not caught Shen Wei.

Zhao Yunlan had an arm around Shen Wei’s waist, drawing him half a step to the side. The lighter’s glow illuminated his face: handsome and cold with sculpted, if slightly gaunt, features. His eyes gleamed from bottomless shadows, reflecting the tiny flame.

Zhao Yunlan, the deceptive wolf, held this pose and deliberately deepened his voice. Gazing into Shen Wei’s eyes, he murmured, “Shen-laoshi, are you all right?”

Not a thought was spared for the little intern wailing at his feet.

For a few seconds, Zhao Yunlan thought Shen Wei’s expression was understandably dazed. But compared to Guo Changcheng, the well-mannered Shen-laoshi was the epitome of calm and collected. He recovered in no time at all, then he looked down, removed a certain someone’s wandering hands from his waist, and pushed his glasses up. “I’m fine, thank you.”

Guo Changcheng had never been so overjoyed at anyone’s arrival in his life. Still kneeling, he stretched out his neck and screamed, “Director Zhao, save me!” His appearance was as comical as it was wretched.

Zhao Yunlan quickly assessed the little room, ascertained that there had been no casualties, and relaxed. Even in the midst of it all, he managed a jokingly theatrical tone. “What woes have befallen you good folk? Quickly now, have you written an account? Share it with me, that I may know of your tribulations!”

Guo Changcheng flattened himself fully against the floor.

Shen Wei reached up and rubbed the bridge of his nose to hide the beginnings of a smile.

Then the re-defeated Hunger Ghost got up yet again, as if it was set to automatically respawn. Shen Wei's head snapped up as the creature waved its giant claws and charged at Zhao Yunlan's back. "Watch out!"

Zhao Yunlan twisted his body to the side. One huge claw after the other swiped just past his face with a faint icy wind. He crossed his forearms above his head to block the attack with his short blade, then grabbed the Hunger Ghost's wrist. The quick, powerful movements betrayed well-trained precision and sharpness.

There was still a smile in his eyes when they met the Hunger Ghost's and his dimples were still visible, but something about that smile was chilling.

A deep male voice rang out behind the Hunger Ghost. "Namo Amitabha—"

There was a distant sound of a large bell being struck, a reverberation that seemed to travel along one's bones and all the way to the soul. Guo Changcheng felt a ringing in his head and saw stars; Meanwhile, Li Qian, who had been struggling against her bonds the whole time, suddenly stiffened and went still.

The Hunger Ghost reacted as if shot in the head. It flung its head back with an agonized scream, shedding clouds of black shadow. By the time Zhao Yunlan let go, the ghost had been reduced to the size of a skeletal human, stomach bulging. It was as weak as a shadow that a breeze could blow away.

Only then did Zhao Yunlan lazily take out a palm-sized glass bottle. There was a cold gleam on the bottle's lip. The Hunger Ghost shivered violently as if wanting to flee, but Lin Jing stood behind it, blocking the door. Pressing his palms together, he deftly formed a vajra seal; suddenly this average-looking man became an immovable presence. The Hunger Ghost was shoved back from the doorway, unable to pass.

Zhao Yunlan had already removed the cork stopper, aiming the bottle's opening at the Hunger Ghost. Instantly, the Hunger Ghost's large, bald head contorted into Munch's painting *The Scream*. With a hysterical display worthy of being immortalized in art, the monster was sucked inside. The clear glass turned black.

Zhao Yunlan screwed the cork back in tightly and held this crude prison with its terrible lack of amenities up to his ear. He gave it a few rough shakes, then cheerfully said, "That's that!" to Lin Jing, still behind him.

Daqing regained enough consciousness to crack his eyes open. As if with his dying breath, he said, "You guys used violence to uphold the law again. I couldn't sleep through all the racket."

Zhao Yunlan stuffed the complaining cat into his briefcase, but Daqing was undeterred. In a weak, thready voice, he asked, "What took you so long?"

"Traffic on the southeast side of the Second Ring Road was a nightmare." Zhao Yunlan patted his furry head. "Later I'll give you a bonus for all your hard work. Just go to sleep now."

Daqing's eyes drooped shut, but the nagging continued as if he were talking in his sleep. "I… I want to eat pan-fried little croakers…"

Zhao Yunan had nothing to say in response.

Guo Changcheng gave Zhao Yunlan a bewildered look. "Is… Is that it?"

Zhao Yunlan's expression was shadowed with impatience, but he remembered Shen Wei's presence in time not to fuck up his good-tempered act. Rearranging his features into a smile, he said, "Just about."

As he spoke, he walked past Guo Changcheng and touched Shen Wei's elbow. "You're really not injured? I'm so sorry for dragging you into this. We should still go get you checked out."

Shen Wei allowed Zhao Yunlan to take his hand, completely unguarded. "I'm really—" He broke off, expression going blank, and lost consciousness.

He fell right into Zhao Yunlan's waiting arms. Zhao Yunlan caught him effortlessly and then, half kneeling, slipped one arm under the crook of his knees. Leaning close to Shen Wei's ear, he quietly said, "Today, a female student named Li Qian attempted suicide by jumping off a building, but she was unsuccessful. You took her to the hospital, where a doctor saw that your blood sugar was low and kept you here for a day for observation.

"Also, back when you lived in the twin towers, when a series of suicides occurred there, you saw officer Zhao Yunlan, who was in charge of the case. It turned out that the victims belonged to a cult, and it was a mass suicide. Despite the rumors, there was nothing supernatural about it. Remember that."

With a significant look at Zhao Yunlan, Lin Jing pointed at Li Qian.

Zhao Yunlan continued murmuring into Shen Wei's ear. "As for Li Qian, she's involved with a murder case, so the police took her in for questioning. You don't remember anything else."

Shen Wei's glasses were askew and had slid down his nose, revealing the exquisite lines of his eyes and brows. He was completely insensible, head pillowed on Zhao Yunlan's shoulder. Zhao Yunlan leaned down, picked him up, and walked out.

Lin Jing lifted Li Qian and slung her over his shoulder. After a few steps, noticing that Guo Changcheng hadn't budged, he turned back and asked politely, "Benefactor,[17] this humble monk has another shoulder. Do you need to be carried out as well?"

"No, no, no, no…" Guo Changcheng said numbly. "No thank you."

Lin Jing held up a hand in front of his chest and bowed his head. "Amitabha. You're welcome."

With that, he strolled out of the room.

At some point, all the nurses on duty had reappeared. Zhao Yunlan carefully avoided them as he took Shen Wei back to Li Qian's room, where he removed the man's glasses thoughtfully and set them aside. Then Zhao Yunlan tucked him into bed and turned the heat up.

After a moment's thought, he took hold of Shen-laoshi's right hand and drew an invisible calming charm on the back of it with his forefinger. That done, he grinned smugly and planted a light kiss in the same spot. Having allowed himself this indulgence, he said gleefully, "Good night, sleeping beauty. When I'm done with the case, I'll ask you out properly."

"Let's go." He waved to Lin Jing and Guo Changcheng. "We're expecting an honored guest at midnight and can't keep him waiting. Time to go back and wrap this up."

After the sound of their receding footsteps had completely faded down the hall, Shen Wei, who should have been sound asleep, opened his eyes. He sat up, all traces of sleepiness gone. Raising his right hand, he slid a finger gently along the skin, revealing a soft golden charm.

He stared at it for a long while, his gaze tender, but the subconscious smile at the corners of his lips was all too fleeting. His brows had knit together again, as though he were worried, or perhaps in pain.

Shen Wei muttered something under his breath, and the golden charm lifted lightly from his hand like a slip of paper, floating in midair. He caught it tightly and carefully stowed it away. Then he rose, straightened up the hospital bed, and leapt easily from the second-floor window, vanishing into the night without a trace.

Chapter 11

IT WAS NEARLY MIDNIGHT when Zhao Yunlan and the others got back to 4 Bright Avenue, so lao-Wu was once again the doorman on duty. At the sight of Guo Changcheng, lao-Wu opened his large, fierce mouth and greeted him enthusiastically. "Hey, xiao-Guo! You're back! How did your first assignment go?"

Compared to an evening of being chased by the Hunger Ghost, scurrying and clambering all over the place, lao-Wu's papier-mâché face seemed downright kind. Guo Changcheng smiled weakly and kept his real feelings to himself. "I-It was great…"

Lao-Wu laughed, bright and clear. "It's okay if you're not used to it at first. Work hard and learn. You're alive! You have potential!"

For the first time, Guo Changcheng realized that even he had an advantage in this workforce: he was alive.

Zhao Yunlan motioned to Lin Jing and Guo Changcheng to go on ahead with Li Qian. He parked, checked the time, and then spoke to lao-Wu privately. "You know about this case, right? An escapee from the other side. Since we only have the authority to make the arrest but not to interrogate or pass judgment, the Soul-Executing Emissary will be stopping by personally. Please make sure to welcome him."

Taken aback, lao-Wu unconsciously stood taller and lowered his voice. "That… That lord?"

Nodding, Zhao Yunlan patted him on the shoulder. Then, somewhat tired, he lit a cigarette to wake himself up a little before walking into the office.

Lao-Wu didn't dare go back into the gatehouse to sit and read the newspaper. Like a soldier standing guard, he stood at attention at the entrance.

Zhao Yunlan waved at Guo Changcheng and led him into the office. Pointing at a new desk, he said offhandedly, "That's your spot. Ordinarily, if nothing unusual comes up, the workday is from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. We don't do card punching. If you're occasionally late or need to leave early, just let me know. When and if you come to work depends entirely on your self-discipline. Lunch hour is from noon to 1 p.m. The cafeteria's on the second floor, and employees eat and drink for free. You get paid vacation time, and your comprehensive benefits will be set up shortly. Everything is included, so don't worry."

Having said all that, Zhao Yunlan took a bank card from his pocket and handed it to Guo Changcheng. "The default PIN is six ones. Change it yourself at the ATM. Your salary and bonuses will all be deposited to the account on this card. Payday is the fifteenth of each lunar month, and your first month's pay is already in this account. If you need to be reimbursed for travel or work expenses, that's through Wang Zheng. Just fill out the reimbursement form during the day and attach your receipts, then leave it on her desk. Ask the others how to fill it out. She'll take care of it overnight, and in the morning you can get the money from her desk."

Guo Changcheng accepted the salary card with both hands. In that moment, he forgot about the terrifying woman whose head was sewn onto her neck. Instead he felt an inexplicable pride: a salary card! Proof that he truly had his first job!

“I-I have an income now!” he stammered, eyes bright.

A dumbass on top of being a money-lover? Interesting combination. Zhao Yunlan smiled wryly. “You’re a nepotism baby, and your uncle’s a government official. You’re not hurting for money, so why the excitement?”

Guo Changcheng looked up, face serious. “I have a use for it! I really do!”

But what that use was, he didn’t say. He just carefully tucked the pay card into his wallet like some rare treasure. Zhao Yunlan was about to say something else when a snow-white light flashed across Guo Changcheng’s body.

Zhao Yunlan looked on in shock. *How does this brat have so many merits?*[18] he wondered. *Because of his ancestors’ blessings, maybe? Or was he someone impressive in a past life?*

He stubbed out his cigarette, narrowed his eyes, and looked the overjoyed Guo Changcheng up and down. Then he pointed at the director’s office across the hall. “I’m usually over there. If you need anything, just knock.” He scrubbed a hand over his face, drawing Guo Changcheng’s attention to the dark circles under his eyes.

Grabbing a chair at random, Zhao Yunlan sat, sprawling forward on the table like a dead dog. “I’m taking a nap. Wake me when he’s here.”

Guo Changcheng had no idea who “he” was, but at least Lin Jing was there too. The poor intern hadn’t shut his eyes in twenty-four hours and had been under nonstop stress. It wasn’t long at all before he drifted off in the thoroughly air-conditioned office.

His nap seemed very brief. Guo Changcheng jolted back awake and instantly felt an indescribable chill.

It was an uncanny kind of cold. The very air seemed motionless. At some point, the office AC had stopped putting out cold air when the temperature plummeted in the entire building. There were even white specks of frost on the windows. The ghost employees stopped bustling around and stood politely with their heads bowed as if lining up to welcome someone important.

Zhao Yunlan had also woken up at some point and was now sitting up straight, pouring hot tea into four cups set in front of him. Seeing Lin Jing cautiously get to his feet, Guo Changcheng, who had no clue what was going on, followed his lead and stood up too.

There was a faint noise as the climate control automatically shifted into heating mode.

Then unhurried footsteps rang out in the empty hallway and came to a stop outside the criminal investigation unit. The door opened as lao-Wu led someone inside, radiating respect that bordered on deference. He escorted the guest all the way into the office, bowed, and pulled a chair out. During all of this, he didn’t even dare raise his head. “My lord, this way, please,” he said.

“My thanks,” the guest said politely.

It was a man’s voice, tremendously pleasant to the ear. His tone was gentle and courteous with a solemn note that made people unthinkingly lower their heads.

Perhaps Guo Changcheng still wasn’t fully awake. Everyone around him was frozen in place, but he did something truly audacious: he gathered his courage and looked up to sneak a peek at their visitor.

The guest's slim body was entirely wrapped in a black robe that hid even his hands and feet, and his face was concealed by a veil of black mist. Nothing else could be discerned through all the inky blackness. He first stopped at the door, then bowed to Zhao Yunlan from a distance, hands together. His long sleeves swept the tops of his feet as he spoke. "My apologies for the disturbance."

Zhao Yunlan held up a yellow paper talisman, lit it, and let the ashes fall into a cup of hot tea. The ashes dissolved in an instant, taking all the heat from the cup with them. In the same moment, a steaming cup appeared in the black-robed man's hands.

"No rush. The journey here must've been freezing. Please make yourself comfortable, Lord-Executing Emissary," Zhao Yunlan said. "Have a hot drink to warm your hands."

Guo Changcheng, having watched Zhao Yunlan burn the talisman to pass the tea, couldn't keep the words "burning spirit money to send it to the dead" from floating through his mind—and then his high-strung nerves processed what Zhao Yunlan had just said.

"Freezing"? he thought, confused. *How could the hottest days of the year be freezing? Where did this person even come from?*

A sudden memory made him shiver violently. When he'd been young, his grandma had talked to him about death. She had been very clear that when the elderly "move on," one has to make sure that they're fed and warm. Otherwise, the intense cold during their long journey on the Huangquan Road[19] could pierce the very soul.

Was it possible that their visitor was…

With his head lowered, the Soul-Executing Emmisary took a sip. "This is good tea. Thank you."

Then he walked past Guo Changcheng and sat in the chair across from Zhao Yunlan. As he passed by, Guo Changcheng caught a scent. It wasn't the rotting smell they'd encountered at the hospital; it wasn't foul at all. It was a very light fragrance that reminded Guo Changcheng of midwinter at the foot of the Daxing'anling Mountains far to the north. It was the scent that accompanies the first breath when you push open the door and walk out into the morning after a whole night of snow. It was the scent of endless, eternally unmelting snow: pure and impossibly cold, tinged with the last fragrance of dying blossoms. The scent carried far into the distance, all the way to the end of the road of life.

The Soul-Executing Emissary spoke softly and eloquently, like a scholar in a period drama. Objectively, other than the eerie black mist concealing his face, he was unremarkable. But as Guo Changcheng came fully awake, he was filled with an unforgettable fear—a fear that was baseless and irrational but rooted in his very soul.

Guo Changcheng finally understood why the sight of this man had made the ghosts in the hall react like mice seeing a cat.

He obviously came from the southern hemisphere, Guo Changcheng told himself. *It's winter there right now.* He shut his eyes, too afraid to keep looking at the Soul-Executing Emissary, and tried to comfort himself with the logic of Core Socialist Values: *Have faith in science, freedom, democracy, harmony…*

There were four people in the office, including ghosts. The black cat was dead to the world, so he didn't count. So Zhao Yunlan had poured four cups of hot tea, but even after its fragrance permeated the entire office, neither Lin Jing nor Guo

Changcheng dared to step forward and take a cup. Only Zhao Yunlan sat calmly behind the table.

After the Soul-Executing Emissary had finished the entire cup of tea in peace, Zhao Yunlan finally asked, “Why did my lord personally come to deal with a mere runaway Hunger Ghost?”

“For a few reasons,” the Emissary replied. “The significant prison break in the Netherworld during the Ghost Festival was due to a certain object resurfacing in the Mortal Realm.”

A light bulb went off in Zhao Yunlan’s head. “The Reincarnation Dial?”

The Emissary nodded. “Ah, so the Guardian already knows. That is correct. The Reincarnation Dial, one of the Four Hallowed Artifacts of the Netherworld, had been lost for a long time. It is too soon now to know whether its sudden reappearance in the Mortal Realm will lead to fortune or calamity. I cannot allow its presence to go unchecked, so I came to see to the matter myself.”

Zhao Yunlan had further questions. “What exactly are these ‘Four Hallowed Artifacts of the Netherworld’?”

The Emissary paused. “A seal.”

“A seal?”

“Legend describes them as a Great Seal tied to the balance of yin and yang and the Six Paths of Reincarnation.[20] Word of this seal has been passed down since time immemorial, and many sources that speak of it can no longer be verified. It may be real, or the stories may have been exaggerated over time. Regardless, the fact remains that living and dead souls alike are irresistibly drawn to the Reincarnation Dial due to its life-lending properties. It has already disrupted the order of reincarnation. If it falls into the hands of someone with ulterior motives, the results will be worse than we can imagine.”

No wonder Li Qian had attracted both a Hunger Ghost and a malevolent spirit, having touched the Reincarnation Dial.

Zhao Yunlan’s expression became serious. Standing up, he said, “I’ll take you to the interrogation room next door.”

The Soul-Executing Emissary followed, moving silently. Surrounded by humans and ghosts struck dumb by fear, he spoke as if making small talk. “The Guardian looks somewhat unwell. You must be working tirelessly day and night due to our folly. You should consider your health.”

Zhao Yunlan waved lazily. “It’s fine. Pulling an occasional all-nighter won’t kill me. And even if it did, it’d still be fine. I can go work for the Netherworld and keep coasting along as a government official.”

The Emissary clearly disagreed. “Life and death are of the greatest importance. The Guardian must not joke so carelessly.”

Zhao Yunlan gave him an unworried smile and pushed open the interrogation room door.

“Li Qian,” who had been locked in the interrogation room, had regained consciousness at some point and had been shrieking ever since. But the moment the Soul-Executing Emissary entered, the shriek cut off. When “Li Qian” saw the

Emissary, she reacted like a hen grabbed by the neck. Her entire body trembled and she stared, petrified, at the doorway. Then her eyes rolled back in their sockets, and she collapsed bonelessly.

Guo Changcheng, following along behind, felt something fly straight at his face. He took a panicked step back. The Emissary raised an arm directly in front of him, the large sleeve carving a huge black arc through the air. The hazy silhouette of a ghost manifested in midair: a long-haired woman in a long, tattered dress. Her face was contorted, and she writhed, screaming endlessly in distress. In an instant she was torn into black smoke and sucked into the Emissary's sleeve.

"Refused to see the error of her ways and attempted to take permanent possession of a living body," the Emissary said mildly. "The punishment is execution." He spoke in the exact same gentle tone he'd used when exchanging pleasantries.

Guo Changcheng shuddered.

Zhao Yunlan seemed oblivious, as if this were a regular occurrence. He turned to the side and made an inviting gesture. Four chairs had been brought into the room, and Li Qian was tied up next to the table, her face pale.

Lin Jing walked up to her with a spray bottle used for watering plants. With no more concern for the girl than he might show a skeleton, he spritzed her in the face with cold water. He clearly wasn't going to go easy on her just because she was a woman.

When she slowly came to, he said, poker-faced, "We're the police. We have some questions for you. You need to answer truthfully. If you don't, there will be consequences."

Li Qian's eyes were glassy. She gave a great shudder as she looked around. When she recognized Guo Changcheng and Zhao Yunlan, she started to say something, then realized she was tied to the chair. Looking at the rope in shock, she asked, "What… What happened to me?"

Compared to Lin Jing, Zhao Yunlan could have been a public spokesperson on TV. He seemed far more personable and spoke gently from beside Lin Jing. "We've apprehended the person who attacked you and murdered your fellow student. Now we need you to assist us in corroborating the account of the incident by giving us a routine statement. That's okay, isn't it?"

Nothing about the situation seemed like they were taking a routine statement. It felt far more like an official interrogation.

Li Qian was no fool. She froze for a moment, then quickly got herself under control. "Then why do you need to tie me up?"

Zhao Yunlan raised an eyebrow, then snapped his fingers. The ropes fell off as if sound activated. Li Qian was startled, but looked up and feigned calm under Zhao Yunlan's scrutiny. She still couldn't keep herself from edging back even as she bluffed. "If you've caught the culprit, what can you possibly need to ask me? I've already told you everything I know. What time is it now? I want to go home."

Lin Jing pounded the table, playing the "bad cop" role to the hilt. "Stop bullshitting and answer our questions! Or are you trying to cover up for them? What's your motive? What's your connection to them?"

With Lin Jing playing the bad guy, it was Zhao Yunlan's role to put a light hand on his shoulder, as if restraining him. Amiably, he asked, "On August 31 at 10:20 p.m., you ran into the victim, Lu Ruomei, outside the school entrance. You saw the thing following her. We've already confirmed all of this and have a general idea of what happened, but I still have a few questions. To start with, when did you first begin seeing them? Was it after you touched that sundial from your hometown? The one with the reincarnation cycle carved into it?"

Li Qian gave Lin Jing a wary glance, then looked down and surrendered to the inevitable. She nodded quickly.

Zhao Yunlan's slender fingers rapped lightly on the table. "Rumor has it that the Reincarnation Dial's base is made from the Three-Life Rock and the back is inlaid with the scales of a black fish from the Wangchuan River. It can bring back the dead, pulling someone who's already died back to the world of the living. But a living person exchanging their life for someone dead is like dipping your hand into the waters of the Huangquan. Ever since then, the yin and yang worlds have overlapped in your vision, haven't they?"

Li Qian's shoulders trembled slightly. She stared at Zhao Yunlan's finger and nodded in silence.

Zhao Yunlan leaned back in his chair. "What a good, filial child you are." His eyes slid half-closed. Thick eyelashes and deep eye sockets made his gaze look a little hazy. Almost sighing, he said, "So many people pay lip service to the principle of 'when at home, be filial; when outside, be respectful.' But how many youths in their prime, when confronted with the Reincarnation Dial, would really be able to give their life for someone else?"

At this, the Soul-Executing Emissary spoke up. "The Reincarnation Dial is among the Netherworld's Four Hallowed Artifacts. It can disrupt the balance of yin and yang. It is not meant for mortal use."

Like everyone else, Li Qian was too afraid to look up at the Emissary. Her fingers twisted together as he spoke, and she pieced her reply together with great difficulty. "I-I didn't know what it was. I'd just heard that it was an old relic that grants wishes. When my grandma had a sudden cerebral hemorrhage, I was at school, so no one was there to notice. By the time someone found her, it was too late to treat her. B-by the time I saw her, she…she had already… Back then, she wasn't just someone I happened to live with. My parents both saw me as a spare. She's the one who brought me up. We *depended* on each other. Do you understand what that feels like? I couldn't even cry. I couldn't even convince myself she was gone. How could she die…? How can someone just *die*?"

"So you found the Reincarnation Dial," Zhao Yunlan said.

"I thought I was crazy too, believing in something like that. But then it really responded," Li Qian muttered. "What did I have to be scared of? I'm still so young. I could even live to be a hundred. I could give her fifty years and still live until retirement. With so many years left in my life, why couldn't I give some to her? If mortals shouldn't touch stuff from the Netherworld, then why did it happen to be there? Why did it respond to my wish?"

Her question made everyone fall silent. Eventually, it was the Soul-Executing Emissary who spoke. "Because at that moment, you sincerely wanted her alive again, no matter the cost. There are times when, if a person's will is strong enough, anything

can happen. But no amount of desire can make some things right."

Li Qian's eyes reddened. She stubbornly looked away, as if her feelings of being wronged were a vulnerability that shouldn't be shown to anyone else. After a while, in a muffled voice, she said, "Yeah, I'm just an ordinary person. What does it matter what life throws at me? My only real family suddenly passes away, leaving me with parents who hate me. No one acknowledges my efforts. I have to desperately scrape tuition together every year, and even after working so hard, I still can't find a single proper job in Dragon City. Other people must think I'm incredibly pitiful, right? I have to endure this constant stream of awful things. Maybe I never should have brought my grandma back. Maybe I should've died with her."

Zhao Yunlan looked at her calmly, not interrupting.

Barely audible, she continued, "I feel like a turtle struggling to crawl across the ground. If someone passes by and gives me a little kick, I'll end up on my back. Then they'll watch my agonized flailing, and when I'm finally back upright and exhausted, they'll kick me again. It'll all have been for nothing. Hilarious, isn't it?"

There was indescribable resentment and discontent in this girl, for all her apparent effort to hide it.

Guo Changcheng's face felt hot. He didn't think he was intelligent or hardworking. He had always drifted through life, never quite knowing what was going on, and then a job had fallen into his lap. Now he stood up and stammered ingratiatingly, "I-I'll go get you some water."

Li Qian, lost in her own emotions, ignored him.

Zhao Yunlan pressed, "The Reincarnation Dial responded to you. Your grandma was brought back, but her health was never quite the same. Were you the one taking care of her?"

"Who else?" Li Qian was expressionless. "Bringing her here was a huge sacrifice for my parents to begin with, but they had to keep up appearances."

Zhao Yunlan nodded. "You had to study, earn your own tuition and living expenses, and care for your grandma on top of it all. It must've been really hard, huh?"

At this point, Lin Jing finally looked at his superior, caught off guard. He'd initially thought Zhao Yunlan had asked him to play along in order to trick the truth out of this young woman who'd lied about the Hunger Ghost case, but listening to the line of questioning, Lin Jing wasn't sure exactly what Zhao Yunlan wanted to find out. How had they gotten so far off topic?

The Soul-Executing Emissary had been sitting to the side, back straight, with no sign of impatience. Lin Jing was in no position to butt in, so he could only sit there and listen in confusion.

Guo Changcheng keenly poured a cup of warm water and passed it to Li Qian. She accepted without thanking him. Her eyebrow twitched nervously as she stared at the cup in her hands. She looked calm, but tremors appeared on the water's surface.

"She would wake up at 4:30 every morning because she wanted to make me breakfast. As time went on, she got more and more confused. Once she was boiling milk and didn't even realize that it had boiled over and put the flame out. We nearly had a gas leak. I didn't dare let her make breakfast again after that, but telling her was no use. You could tell her one day and she'd do it again the next day. So I had to get

up at 4:30 too and make breakfast."

"Then, during the day, I'm not home. I have to juggle my classes, helping my advisor with projects, and intern work. No matter where I am, the bus ride is forty minutes to an hour, so I had to rush home to make her lunch, then pour her hot water and make her take her medication. I didn't have time to eat before rushing back. Once I came home in the evening, I'd have to get her settled before I could study for a bit, and I could never get much done. She was old, so she always wanted to talk, no matter the time or place. She interrupted me a lot. Once she went to bed around 10 p.m., I could finally do some freelance translation work, usually until midnight or later. Sometimes I'd be too exhausted and just fall asleep at my desk. And you ask if it was *hard*?"

Li Qian took a deep breath. Tremendous fatigue showed on her face, as if even speaking were a huge burden. Then a bitter smile replaced the exhaustion as she took a sip of water, hiding her expression. "There's no point talking about all of that," she said icily. "Let's get this over with. What other questions do you have about the case? Hurry up and ask."

Zhao Yunlan tapped lightly on the file. "This may sound heartless, but after your grandma passed away, things got a lot easier for you, didn't they?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" she spat, glaring.

"Just what I said," answered Zhao Yunlan, unmoved.

Li Qian's lips trembled. She stood abruptly, knocking over her cup and spilling the remaining water everywhere. "Is this how the police operate? You detain innocent citizens for no reason, then slander them however you want?"

"Sit down. Don't get so worked up." Zhao Yunlan pulled out a few tissues to wipe the table off. "I'm describing human nature, not slandering you. Even if you wanted to bomb the Pentagon, no one in the world could say you did something wrong as long as you didn't act on it. We don't have thought crimes here."

Voice hard, Li Qian said, "I want to go home. You have no right to detain me."

Zhao Yunlan glanced at her and nodded. "Okay, we'll get back on topic for now. Let's just chat about this morning. You told me you saw Lu Ruomei at the school entrance, along with the 'shadow' following her. Can you remember what it looked like?"

Li Qian's brow creased. "I didn't see clearly. I don't really remember."

He laughed, showing his dimples, but the smile didn't reach his eyes. His gaze was getting sharper. "It's one thing to not remember a person who just passed by or whether the driver in a car crash was a man or a woman. That's all normal. But to not remember something that's got you this scared? If you don't remember, why are you shaking right now?"

Li Qian froze, slim fingers clenching nervously. Zhao Yunlan's tone turned severe. "Just this morning, you were describing its height—how it was totally black, a bit short, and a little chubby."

The color drained completely from her face.

Zhao Yunlan narrowed his eyes. "Tongxue, changing your statement on a whim isn't a good habit. Was that description accurate or not?"

Lin Jing had a lot of experience working with him. While Li Qian was still sitting in shock with no time to organize her thoughts, he seized the opportunity to

pound on the table. “Tell us!”

Zhao Yunlan had been adding layers of pressure, pushing Li Qian’s nerves to their limits, and now Lin Jing slashed through them with one strike.

“So—so what if it was?!” Li Qian blurted.

“Oh, not tall, a little chubby.” Zhao Yunlan enunciated each word. He leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands on the table. “Then was it a man or a woman? Old or young?”

Of everyone in the room, only Li Qian didn’t know what the Hunger Ghost looked like. None of those words—man or woman, young or old—applied to it. It wasn’t even shaped like a human. It was practically skin and bones other than its massive, bulging belly, and the size of a human but with mantis-like arms.

Guo Changcheng’s expression turned confused as he looked at her. The Soul-Executing Emissary simply sat there, radiating his terrifying presence. The plain fact was that Li Qian didn’t have much life experience, so she wasn’t hard to read.

To Li Qian, it felt like countless people were staring at her, faces cold as they scrutinized and ridiculed her. They all knew her secret, despite how well she’d thought she had hidden it.

She began to panic.

Zhao Yunlan’s voice fell almost to a whisper. “I was lying just now. The human memory *can* become fuzzy, especially after a sudden scare. That’s why eyewitness accounts are often unreliable. That thing was more terrifying than you could bear, so your brain protected itself by blanking out that moment in your memory. From there, your mind automatically filled in that blank. So what you described is what your imagination came up with—the scariest thing it could conceive of.”

Very belatedly, Guo Changcheng came to the realization that this was far from a routine questioning. This was an actual interrogation. Though he was stupid, sensitive, and unsure what was happening, he still had a bad sort of feeling. Between the Soul-Executing Emissary’s motionless presence and the relentless interrogation, he almost couldn’t breathe.

Li Qian’s deathly pale face turned ashen, and Zhao Yunlan dismissed his warm, pleasant smile. “Now, can you tell me why you wanted to commit suicide this morning?” he asked. Li Qian’s chest heaved. “You didn’t sleep last night, did you? When you ran to the rooftop, was there a moment when you thought that if you just let go and died, you wouldn’t need to be afraid anymore? That no matter what had happened, it would all be wiped clean?” Zhao Yunlan’s expression was somewhere between a smirk and pity. “Young lady, I’m a good few years older than you, so I’m going to call you a kid for now. Many kids your age think they don’t fear death. You’re young enough to not understand what it truly is, especially a stubborn, decisive, impulsive youngster like you. You think death doesn’t scare you at all.”

Li Qian’s instinctive retort was sharp, but her voice was weak. “How… How *dare* you say that? How would you know if someone understands death or not? I understand that feeling perfectly! I’ve seen it for myself! One day they’re still speaking, and then next thing you know, they’ve curled up into a ball somewhere you can’t see… Their heart stops and their breathing stops and they—they slowly get so cold, and then they’re just a corpse, a *thing* that isn’t human anymore, and you’ll never, ever be able to find her or see her again, not ever—”

“Li Qian,” Zhao Yunlan interrupted. “The thing you understand and fear isn’t death. It’s parting. You just can’t accept that your grandma suddenly left you.”

The entire room fell dead silent. Li Qian trembled like a fallen leaf tossed about by the autumn wind.

Zhao Yunlan broke the silence. “That night, what you saw at the school entrance, the shadow following your classmate, was it… Was she very old and dressed in simple cotton, with a fake bun on her head?”

As the words left his mouth, the confusion on the faces around the table turned to shock.

A short, hoarse scream burst out of Li Qian. Her features twisted into a frightening expression.

Has she gone insane? Guo Changcheng thought, his eyes and mouth wide. He didn’t understand what exactly was happening. When he looked over at his boss, he saw Zhao Yunlan’s fingers rubbing together subconsciously, like he was desperate for a cigarette but doing his best to resist.

His gaze was deep but calm. The light hitting his face and shirt—wrinkled but still snow white—suddenly gave him an otherworldly air. He pulled a picture out of his pocket: an old woman’s memorial photo. She had a kind, benevolent countenance with a smile lurking at the corners of her mouth, and her expression was at peace. Guo Changcheng immediately recognized her as the old lady who had rushed to place herself in front of Li Qian’s hospital bed at the most dangerous moment.

Zhao Yunlan pushed the photo toward Li Qian. Steepling his fingers under his chin, which was dusted with stubble from days of continuous overtime, he said, “This is Mrs. Wang Yufen, born in the spring of 1940. She passed away late last month. Cause of death: mistaken consumption of hypoglycemic medication.”

Li Qian stared at the memorial photo, eyes so wide that Guo Changcheng suspected they were about to fall out.

Zhao Yunlan continued, “Your grandma raised you. You two were always close. You used the Reincarnation Dial for her and gave her half of your life. But once she came back to life, her mind began to slowly erode. You took care of her the whole time. My colleague told me that nearly everything in your online shopping history is some sort of product for the elderly. And according to her doctors, even after her mind started to go, she was never remotely aggressive toward anyone. So tell me, what made you think your grandma would harm you after her death? Why are you so afraid of her?”

For all the reaction she showed, Li Qian might have been a human wax figure.

“Why won’t you speak?” Zhao Yunlan asked. “Li Qian, I’ll ask one last time. If you don’t tell the truth, you’ll never have another opportunity to speak honestly again. You’ll want to be free of this burden, but that will be impossible. A lie will always be a lie. Once you carelessly pick it up, you’ll be unable to put it down again for as long as you live.”

Just that day, someone else had told her something similar. Li Qian’s dull gaze gradually lifted, inch by inch.

Zhao Yunlan leaned forward slightly. Looking into her eyes and pausing after every word, he said, “My colleague told me that two lives connected through the Reincarnation Dial will live and die together, and yet somehow you’re still alive even

though your grandma has passed on. That presumably means she died before her time was up. At first I couldn't figure it out. How could she die prematurely? Did a reaper make a mistake, or did someone detain her soul illegally? Then I realized I was missing the obvious explanation: the connection between her life and the Reincarnation Dial it was tethered to was unexpectedly broken. In other words, the person who gave her that life was also the one who killed her.

"When an old person's mind slips away, they're like a child: they're useless, they want to eat all sorts of things, and they tend to eat whatever snacks there are at home. So tell me, who put that bottle of hypoglycemic medication beside the box she so often ate candies from?"

In the silence that followed, one could have heard a pin drop.

Within the span of a few seconds, Li Qian's face underwent a transformation. Her initial extreme horror swelled like a balloon being inflated, but just as it seemed unable to contain any more, a surprising calm settled over her features.

Guo Changcheng held his breath.

Li Qian's voice, faintly hoarse, pierced the silence. Quietly, she said, "It was me."

Chapter 12

"WHEN I WAS LITTLE, my grandma would wake me up every morning, braid my hair, and take me to school. I was always still sleepy, so every day I leaned against her and dozed while she did my braids. Once she was done, she'd give me a gentle pat on the back of my head and say, 'Wake up, lazybones.' Then she'd drag me to school. On the way, she would tell me stories from *Journey to the West*, from *Sun Wukong's Three Battles Against the White Bone Spirit* to *Zhubajie Eating Watermelons*. She had the entire *Heroes in Sui and Tang Dynasties* in her head, and was a better storyteller than the ones on the radio.

"Neither of my parents cared for me, so any time someone asked me who I liked best, I always chose my grandma." Li Qian wasn't speaking to anyone else in the room, only to herself.

Zhao Yunlan finally couldn't take it anymore. He fished out a cigarette and began playing with it between his fingers, but he said nothing.

Uncomprehending, Guo Changcheng asked, "But then later…you stopped liking her?"

Li Qian gave him a long look. "I remember you said before that you'd have been willing to exchange your life for your grandma's. Good thing your family didn't have the Reincarnation Dial."

Guo Changcheng stared at her blankly, then began groping for an explanation for what he couldn't understand. "Did you think she was a burden? Was it too much pressure for you, and life got too…"

The rims of Li Qian's eyes were so red that they looked like they were about to bleed, but her gaze was still numb and cold. They held an indescribable kind of cruelty, bordering on inhuman—and yet somehow perfectly human. She cut Guo Changcheng off. "Don't insult me with such a stupid reason."

Guo Changcheng's face went red.

"She slowly became a different person. Every day, she nagged me constantly. She wouldn't remember what had happened the day before and just constantly repeated the same thing over and over. Toward the end, she even started losing control of her bowels. Every time she wet herself, she'd give me a vacant smile. When she ate, she got grains of rice all over herself and the floor. Even just sitting there, she drooled. She couldn't even tell time. No matter what you were busy with, she'd stumble around behind you, mumbling incoherently day after day, day after day! And every single day I'd look at her and think, 'this is what I exchanged half my life for.'"

The corner of Li Qian's lips twitched in an abrupt, frigid smile. Guo Changcheng felt like his heart was being crushed.

"The grandma I want will never come back. The thing I paid such a huge price for was just—" and Li Qian's face twisted harshly as she spat out the cruelest words, "—a monster that looked like her."

Lifting her red eyes, she stared into Guo Changcheng's face. "I hate her. Every single day of the year, every time I saw her, I wanted to kill her. Despite all that, I still

had to speak so patiently and kindly and ask if she wanted to eat anything, if she wanted to go to the bathroom, and whether she was tired or cold. And in return, she'd just give me that stupid smile."

Guo Changcheng's hand trembled on his knee.

"Do you get it? The Reincarnation Dial lied to me. Nothing in the world can truly bring back the dead. That person wasn't my grandma. Before, she was afraid of me suffering even the tiniest bit. When I was little, there were no electric fans in our village. She'd stay up the whole night to fan me by hand. How could she turn into a monster? How could she turn into a monster who did nothing but hurt me?" Li Qian laughed sharply. "You don't understand anything, so don't you dare judge me! When she was alive, she harassed me nonstop. Now that she's dead, she still won't stop! I —"

"She won't anymore." Guo Changcheng interrupted in a stern voice he didn't know he could muster. "She disappeared. You were possessed by something, and the Hunger Ghost was about to eat you, so she let herself be killed by the Hunger Ghost to protect you. We all saw. She died again. Everyone knows but you."

Li Qian froze.

Guo Changcheng lowered his head, upset almost to the point of crying—but for whom, he didn't know. In the end, very quietly, he said, "Even if you had seen, you still would've believed she wanted to hurt you, wouldn't you? But she didn't.

"She wasn't harassing you at all. She didn't blame you, and she never wanted to harm you."

"You believe hearts to be fickle because your own feelings change so casually."[21]

"I think I understand it all now. But premeditated murder isn't under our jurisdiction." Zhao Yunlan stood up as he spoke, patting Guo Changcheng's shoulder. "Let's go. We don't need to send her back. We'll keep her here overnight, then tomorrow we'll tell Zhu Hong to contact our colleagues who handle criminal cases in the city. If she needs to be taken away, then take her away. If she needs to be investigated, then investigate. Tomorrow morning, I'll call Shen-laoshi to tell him—er, is there something else, Lord Emissary?"

The Soul-Executing Emissary had walked around the little table, stopping in front of Li Qian. She cowered instinctively in his presence.

"Do not be afraid. I do not trespass upon the concerns of mortals," he said. "However, when it comes to the Hallowed Artifact, I must do my due diligence. You spoke of finding the Reincarnation Dial in your hometown. Where is it now?"

"I-It's at my place." Li Qian said quietly. "My parents rented a little spot for us to live. They rarely stop by."

"What is the address?"

"XX South City Street, building X, room XXX."

"Thank you." The Emissary gave a courteous nod, seeming to look at Li Qian. Then he paused and said mildly, "One day we will meet in the Netherworld. On that day, I will await you with justice."

Guo Changcheng followed Zhao Yunlan out, his mind awhirl. After escorting the Emissary to the door, he still seemed unsatisfied by how things had played out. He took one last look back at Li Qian, who was still sitting there, dazed.

The Soul-Executing Emissary departed quickly in order to retrieve the Reincarnation Dial before dawn broke. In his wake, the white frost on the windows visibly melted away and the temperature in the office rose quickly. The climate control switched back to cooling mode, but Guo Changcheng still felt wave after wave of chills down his back.

He followed Zhao Yunlan like a little tail, looking as if he wanted to say something.

Zhao Yunlan grabbed his car keys and bag, then glanced at him. “We’re done now. Aren’t you leaving?”

Guo Changcheng looked down at his toes. “Director Zhao, after the Hunger Ghost tears souls apart, can they still live—can they still reincarnate?”

Zhao Yunlan’s eyebrow rose. “It isn’t likely.”

“Then… Then that old lady’s really gone?”

Zhao Yunlan pretended to think about it for a second, then suddenly smiled and took a small bottle from his pocket. He beckoned Guo Changcheng over like a dog. “I almost forgot. Here, kid.”

Guo Changcheng came closer, confused.

“Take this. The Soul-Executing Emissary gave me this just now. On occasion, the Lord Emissary can be merciful and lenient.” Zhao Yunlan shoved the little bottle into Guo Changcheng’s hand. Then he walked to the office cat bed and reached out to pinch Daqing’s nose like the annoyance he was. He watched as Daqing, who was still sleeping, let out a noise like a snore and flailed with his paws, trying to scratch, at which point Zhao Yunlan cheerfully let go. “Whoever gets here early tomorrow morning, remember to ask the cafeteria to fry some dried fish and bring it over.”

Guo Changcheng looked down at the glass bottle, which was smaller than his palm. At first he was confused, but then his eyes widened—the old lady who had disappeared was inside!

She was the size of a fingernail, sitting there peacefully. She gave him a light smile, and then suddenly her wrinkled face smoothed out. Her hair grew longer, black flowing from its roots to its ends. Strong new teeth appeared in her mouth as her body straightened and became slender. The mature beauty of her thirties was restored, then the youthful prettiness of her twenties, and then, slowly, she became thinner and shorter. She was a girl now, a child…and finally, a baby curled up on her side.

The baby slowly closed her eyes, and then the tiny body was gone.

Shocked, Guo Changcheng exclaimed, “She… She disappeared!”

“That’s a Bottle of Rebirth. She’s reentered the reincarnation cycle,” said Lin Jing, who had come up behind him at some point. “From life to death, then from death to life. From youth to old age, then from old age back to youth, again and again, never ending.”

Having said that, Lin Jing looked down, chanted a quick “Amitabha,” and added, “We’re done. Go home. Work starts tomorrow morning at nine, but the cafeteria starts serving breakfast at eight. If you want some, come earlier. Don’t be late.”

It seemed that one of Guo Changcheng’s wishes had been granted. He carefully put the bottle in his bag and left, satisfied.

Having gotten rid of the gullible little intern, Lin Jing turned to Zhao Yunlan. “I didn’t see the Emissary pass you anything. Li Qian touched the Hallowed Artifact from the Netherworld without permission, so she must suffer this hardship. The old woman was willing to take it for her, so she died for a reason. It’s all just cause and effect, so what is there to be lenient about?”

“Hmph,” Zhao Yunlan said. “So you’re the only smart one here, the only one with a sharp eye? Are you happy now?”

“I heard you were completely dissatisfied with that intern—that he only got in here because he has connections and that you wanted to get rid of him,” said Lin Jing. “Why did you subtly comfort him like that?”

Lighting a cigarette, Zhao Yunlan waved at him impatiently. “Because I fucking wanted to. Why are you still here?”

Lin Jing shook his head and sighed, looking like he wanted to express some opinion about his boss. But when Zhao Yunlan’s sharp gaze cut toward him, Lin Jing’s opinion quickly became “wise men don’t go against the tide.” Grabbing the water bottle on his desk, he made his escape.

Zhao Yunlan locked up the office. He’d intended to go home and sleep but found himself thinking of the Emissary, who’d left in such a hurry. He couldn’t shake his curiosity about the Hallowed Artifact, so he headed to Li Qian’s address, telling himself that he’d just skip work the next day, even if it was a despicable move.

When Zhao Yunlan arrived, he found the entire building caged inside a pitch-black aura that thrummed with bloodshed. Unable to imagine what might have caused it, he parked on the roadside and hurried upstairs, gun drawn.

A huge black hole hovered above the building like the gaping maw of a gigantic monster. The elevators weren’t working, so Zhao Yunlan ran all the way up to the roof, which he found littered with corpses and bones.

He took a close look at the corpses, trying to figure out what kind of monsters had died there. Some had had three heads, some had bellies on both sides, and some had had human heads on skeletal bodies…but what they all had in common was that they’d been beheaded in a single stroke. The moonlight struck the ground like a coating of fresh blood.

Not far away, the Soul-Executing Emissary stood, Soul-Executing Blade in hand. The blade was held to a person’s throat.

Perhaps “person” wasn’t quite right. The being’s features were horrifically warped and warty, inspiring both fear and revulsion.

“What kind of monster is this?” Zhao Yunlan reached into his jacket. “My lord Soul-Executing Emissary, do you need a hand?”

The Soul-Executing Emissary waved at him without turning around. Speaking to the wart-covered creature, he said, “I will ask one final time. Where is the Reincarnation Dial?”

The monster turned its neck stiffly under the blade and looked in Zhao Yunlan's direction. It replied to the Emissary but didn't answer his question. "My master asked me to convey a message. My lord, you have performed your duties meticulously for centuries, each day like the one before. You've avoided the person enshrined at the tip of your heart much as you'd avoid raging floods and savage beasts. To all appearances you are the epitome of self-control, but don't you truly fear being unable to control yourself?"

The Emissary said nothing, but the coldness emanating from him grew heavier.

"My master has tremendous sympathy for your deep feelings, my lord, and went to the effort of having him brought before you. He wished to see if you are truly without desire, without—"

This time, the Emissary didn't let the creature finish. His blade flashed, turning the wart-covered head into a fountain of blood. The stench it unleashed was foul enough to make one's head spin. Then a wind swept over the roof, so fierce that Zhao Yunlan was forced to close his eyes. When it died down, the roof had returned to normal, as if the corpses and monsters strewn over it had never existed.

Zhao Yunlan called out, "Wait, my lord—"

The Soul-Executing Emissary turned without approaching and bowed in farewell, hands clasped. Offering no explanation, he quickly ducked into the black hole. In that always-composed figure, Zhao Yunlan actually detected a hint of panic.

When the Soul-Executing Blade came out, even gods stayed away. Who would dare challenge him to his face?

Zhao Yunlan's brows creased in thought. The Reincarnation Dial, said to wreak havoc upon the reincarnation cycle, had been stolen…but by whom?

ARC 2

MOUNTAIN-RIVER AWL

Chapter 13

THE OFFICES OF 4 Bright Avenue were far from being a cavern full of webs or a nest of bones. In daylight hours, there was no indication at all of any ghostly presence. The daytime doorman was a kindly old gent who seemed entirely ordinary, although Guo Changcheng eventually realized that the man wasn't as normal as he seemed. His hobby was making bone sculptures, so there were often all sorts of bones stashed around the gatehouse. Throwing open a window in there would fill the air with a cloud of yellowish-white dust.

The criminal investigation unit's office was bright and clean with excellent lighting. Every employee had their own desk and computer, and the office supplies were well stocked. The re were even plants. A part-time janitor came and cleaned every day at 2 p.m. sharp. The office had central air. A small side room was equipped with a fridge and cupboard; cat food was stored there, along with yogurt, fruit, and other snacks that staff could help themselves to.

Guo Changcheng had initially been mystified by the discovery of a freezer drawer full of the kind of sliced raw meat used for hotpot. Then one day he saw Zhu Hong, the office beauty, grab a pack. Once it thawed, she ate it the way other girls ate chips, dipping each slice in blood. The next day she called in sick due to the usual monthly trouble—except in her case, it wasn't what one might assume. When she came back to work on the third day, Guo Changcheng gawked at the sight of her massive python tail. While she was in that state, Zhu Hong ate raw, bloody meat for several days, after which she was back to walking around on two feet and eating like a human again.

There was one more member of the criminal investigation unit besides the gorgeous snake lady, the fake monk, and the black cat. Two weeks after the Hunger Ghost incident, this last colleague finally returned from a work trip, worn out from his travels. He sat in the corner for a whole afternoon, silently filling out reimbursement forms, and then put his head on his desk and fell asleep until Director Zhao heard he was back and personally sent him home.

The nameplate on the man's desk said "Chu Shuzhi." Everyone called him "Chu-ge," but Guo Changcheng didn't have the nerve to strike up a conversation. Chu Shuzhi looked around the same age as Lin Jing. He was so skinny that his cheeks were hollow—just skin stretched over bone. It gave him a ferocious look. His brows were always furrowed, and it might have just been Guo Changcheng's imagination, but any time Chu Shuzhi laid eyes on him, that furrow seemed to deepen.

Things were normally quiet at the Special Investigations Department. Once the flurry of activity during Guo Changcheng's first few days settled, he realized it was a textbook case of a job that was "high pay, minimal work, and close to home." In the course of a month, two or maybe three cases would reach the SID. When a case hit their desk, Zhao Yunlan dispatched one or two people to check it out, strictly sticking to their mandate of dealing only with supernatural business. More often than not, cases in the Mortal Realm that looked supernatural in nature turned out to just be humans fooling around, so whoever was sent to take a look would come back and write up a report, and that was that.

And when there wasn't a case? Everyone sat at their desks and read, browsed online, or chatted, generally just killing time until the workday ended.

Guo Changcheng slowly came to understand how many steps were involved when the SID took on a case. The first step was that preliminary look by the team. Once they'd written a report and submitted it to Zhao Yunlan, he would use it to decide whether or not to take the case. If he felt it fell under the SID's jurisdiction, he prepared a report of his own, affixed the official seal, and sent it up the chain. If the situation was urgent, his superiors gave their approval within a business day. At that point every office involved was sent an order clarifying each division's rights and responsibilities to ensure that the SID was free to carry out their work. That was usually the point when Zhao Yunlan would finally show up in person and contact the Public Security departments involved with the case.

The murder of Lu Ruomei in Dragon City occurred during the Ghost Festival.[22] There was no one on duty in the office, but it was a local incident, and while at the crime scene, Daqing caught a whiff of something from the Netherworld. Under the circumstances, Zhao Yunlan made the executive decision to act first and ask for permission later, going back to observe the formalities once the case was closed.

It resulted in so much paperwork that Lin Jing's butt didn't touch a chair for three days.

As for Guo Changcheng, despite not even having half a case to deal with, he survived his three-month trial period and was miraculously kept on.

The even greater miracle was that Zhao Yunlan seemed to have forgotten that he'd ever gritted his teeth against the urge to kick Guo Changcheng out. He was happy to sign Guo Changcheng's application to become a regular full-time employee, and Guo Changcheng, now accustomed to the HR department being empty during the day, happily bounced over with his application to have it put in his record.

After watching him bumble off, Daqing jumped onto Zhao Yunlan's desk, tail up. "Men sure are fickle. Not that long ago you wanted to kick him out like a ball, but now you're keeping him."

Without looking up from his texting, Zhao Yunlan said, "The merits on him are as thick as an Oxford dictionary, so he has stupidly good luck. I'm keeping him as a lucky charm. Besides, the kid's pretty funny."

Daqing was confused. "What merits?"

Zhao Yunlan pointed at his drawer. The black cat wiggled his butt over, opened the drawer, and dug out a large envelope. It contained documentation of Guo Changcheng's contributions to the poverty alleviation program, volunteer photographs, and commemorative donation albums. The list went on. There was also a photocopy of a photo, which showed a postcard hanging on the wall of a mountain elementary school. In a disastrous scrawl, it read "Take care, you guys."

Guo Changcheng, it turned out, had sponsored many, many impoverished students. The oldest documents went back ten years.

Shocked, Daqing said, "Guo Changcheng did all of this?"

"Mm-hmm. Thanks to his family situation, he's probably never wanted for anything in his life. But for some reason, he's done all of this in secret—maybe just

because he's shy. Even his family and relations don't know. They all think his allowance is enough, so the kid's been tight on money all these years."

"Someone like that doesn't come along every day." The cat, who had gotten distinctly fatter, shook his head and sighed. Shamelessly invading Zhao Yunlan's personal space, he peeked at the phone screen. His tone turned to contempt. "You still got it or not? You keep saying he's secretly in love with you. Every single day you harass the man with all your flirting and asking how he is, but you're only now asking him out for a meal?"

Zhao Yunlan hit *send* and flicked Daqing's forehead, knocking him onto his butt. "Shows what you know. Slow work yields refined results! This is the thrill of the chase!"

Shen Wei's reply appeared on the screen. "I'm afraid not. I have to attend a grade meeting tonight."

The cat laughed so hard that he nearly rolled onto his back and off the table. "Grade meeting! A grade meeting! So much for your big talk! Didn't you say you can land anyone you set your sights on? Something about how when girls see you, their eyes light up, and when bottoms see you, they drool? Look how gently he let you down! Tell me, Zhao Yunlan, does rejection hurt?"

Zhao Yunlan gnashed his teeth, feeling a sudden craving for cat meat.

After the Hunger Ghost incident, Zhao Yunlan had made sure to keep in touch with Shen Wei. At first, he'd used the excuse of his job and keeping Shen Wei up to date on Li Qian's case. Then he'd become even more brazen, finding any reason to ask Shen Wei out. Whether Shen Wei was actually incredibly busy or just determined to avoid him was impossible to say, but for all the luck Zhao Yunlan was having, he might as well have been trying to meet the emperor.

Anyone else would have taken a step back by now, but Zhao Yunlan wasn't just anyone. He was a first-class narcissist and still had the absolute conviction that Shen Wei felt a tug of attraction for him. He was tired of people throwing themselves at him, so Shen Wei's behavior was a turn-on. The more reserved and passive the professor was, the hotter Zhao Yunlan's heart burned.

The phone rang. Daqing leaned in to listen, eager for gossip. The voice on the other end was unfamiliar and nervous. "Hello… Mr. Zhao, right? You said you wanted to buy my grandpa's collection of ancient texts. Was that a serious offer?"

Zhao Yunlan's eyes lit up. "Mm-hmm, yes! Absolutely! When can we meet? If it's convenient, sooner is better than later."

The caller said, "Then the price… What do you think…?"

"I don't see any problem," Zhao Yunlan replied, for all the world as if he were rich. "Hurry and name a time, please."

The person sounded very excited. Even after agreeing to meet that afternoon, they kept exclaiming things like, "You must have a real love of ancient tomes," and, "I see you value our cultural heritage." Finally, with great reluctance, they hung up.

"Nice," Daqing said sarcastically. "If you can't get him, shower him with gifts? You're the model of a modern, rich, good-for-nothing young master, O Guardian. The poor kid selling the books must not realize you're some illiterate youth who loves blockbuster films and wuxia novels."

Zhao Yunlan gathered his wallet and car keys, grabbed the scruff of Daqing's neck, and threw him out of his office while the cat yowled pitifully.

Everyone opposite the office heard the door opening. Chu Shuzhi looked up from his stocks in time to see someone rush by. Zhu Hong sighed. "There he goes, off to screw around again."

That evening, Zhao Yunlan successfully caught Shen Wei outside a Dragon City University lecture building.

Shen Wei's eyelid twitched at the sight of his car. He lowered his head and quickened his pace, feigning obliviousness as he walked to the parking lot. Zhao Yunlan didn't call out to him, just hummed a little tune while tailing him in his car. Shen Wei kept up the act the whole way, and Zhao Yunlan followed him the whole way in turn.

Every student who saw what was going on watched curiously. Shen Wei's skin wasn't thick enough to endure a whole crowd of onlookers. Admitting defeat, he changed course and approached Zhao Yunlan. "Officer Zhao, are you looking for me?"

Zhao Yunlan rolled down his window with a sunny grin. Grabbing a huge wooden box from the passenger seat, he shoved it out the window and into Shen Wei's arms. "For you."

Shen Wei was speechless at the gift.

Opening the box, he took one look and pushed it back. "No, no, this is too expensive."

"Hey, hear me out." Zhao Yunlan stopped him and earnestly said, "These aren't gifts from me. They're from a friend who's planning to emigrate. He owns so many ancient tomes! Some are even made of silk or bamboo strips. He can't take them with him, and he couldn't bear the thought of giving them away. What if they wound up with someone who didn't appreciate how precious they are? But I thought of you immediately. It would be such a waste for them to fall into someone else's hands. Giving them a good home would be a real favor, Shen-laoshi." Like the silver-tongued devil he was, he kept a straight face while lying through his teeth.

"I—" Shen Wei began, but he only managed that one word before Zhao Yunlan cut him off again.

"What is it? You and I are so close now, but are we even friends if you won't do this little thing for me? Now, I have dinner plans, so I have to go, but I'll see you soon! Take care of the books for me and I'll buy you dinner tomorrow. Make sure you show up!"

He stepped on the gas and drove off without giving Shen Wei a chance to speak. The plan had worked beautifully: he'd given the gift and scored a date. He even started to whistle.

A man with real taste could never be satisfied with common, vulgar beauty, Zhao Yunlan thought. It was the way of things. Anyone who became rich would have to become cultured and get some antiques and paintings. But ah, Shen Wei… Zhao Yunlan contently looked at his own reflection in the rearview mirror and turned the name over in his heart. Shen Wei was like a famous, expensive blue-and-white vase. Even if you couldn't own it forever, it was worth it just to display it at home for a few

days and bask in its glory.

Below the Huangquan, in the Netherworld…

The Soul-Executing Emissary flew into the Netherworld in a black mist. The ghostly immortals all immediately rushed out to bow in greeting as if welcoming an evil god. Some garments were nearly soiled from fear. The Emissary gave a slight nod, then looked up as the crowd parted.

The Magistrate, red-robed like a groom, dashed forward with dainty, trembling steps. He stopped ten meters away, hurriedly wiping his lowered brow. The words "my lord" passed his lips, but before he could launch into the pleasantries he'd prepared as he ran, the Emissary raised a hand.

"Let us speak only of important matters. Is there any news of the Reincarnation Dial?"

The Magistrate bobbed his head, tripping over himself to report. "Additional searches have been carried out all over. Every reaper of the Netherworld has been dispatched, but I fear there are still no leads. That evil bastard may have used some sort of trick. But my lord, please rest assured: the very moment we have news of the Reincarnation Dial, you will be notified."

The mist over the Soul-Executing Emissary's face concealed his expression, but his gaze was as sharp as his blade. "I am certain you all realize this is of utmost importance. The Four Hallowed Artifacts hold up the Netherworld and all other worlds alike. I fear the Mountain-River Awl may resurface at any time."

Terrified pandemonium broke out before he finished speaking. "What?" blurted the Magistrate.

"The Four Hallowed Artifacts appearing and the Chaos King of the Gui[23] escaping are signs that the Great Seal is already weakening," the Emissary continued, not acknowledging any of them. "We must gather the Hallowed Artifacts together to reinforce the Great Seal before it shatters completely. Failure to do so will have unimaginable repercussions. The Reincarnation Dial is already in the Chaos King of the Gui's hands. We can afford no delays."

Solemnly, the Magistrate said, "This lowly one will report to the Ten Kings at once. We will work together with the Three Realms and do all we can to track down the Chaos King of the Gui and his faction."

Having said his piece, the Emissary bid them all farewell and turned to leave without another word.

The Magistrate hesitated, then called out, "My lord, are you returning to the Mortal Realm?"

"Yes." The Emissary was meticulously courteous but always aloof. He spared a final glance for the Magistrate. "Goodbye."

By the time his voice faded, the Emissary was gone—vanished like mist.

The Magistrate's smile evaporated just as quickly, like a joyful newlywed groom abruptly learning he had married a dead bride. He gave a great sigh.

"Your Honor, this…"

"Any time something happens with the Great Seal, it never ends well," the Magistrate said slowly. "When the Seal was first formed, the Great God Fuxi fell.

The Great Seal loosened twice more after that: once when Sovereign Nüwa fell, and again when Shennong passed away.[24] The Mountain God of the Great Wild entered the Cycle of Reincarnation. Now, at the end of time, the power of the stars grows dim and the signs of the Primordial Gods are nowhere to be found. What will we do when the Seal loosens this time?"

"Isn't the Soul-Executing Emissary the protector of the Great Seal?" a reaper asked.

"The Soul-Executing Emissary?" The Magistrate's laugh was cold. "The Emissary comes from the same place as the Chaos King of the Gui. The only reason he wasn't trapped behind the Great Seal with his Chaos King brother was that the Mountain God of the Great Wild elevated him to demigodhood. Do you really believe he'll stand against his own kind? We don't even know how the Chaos King of the Gui laid his hands on the Reincarnation Dial."

The reaper's expression changed. "But all those years ago, the Mountain God asked him to look after the Great Seal…"

"How weighty is Almighty Fuxi's Great Seal of Heaven and Earth? Who but the Primordial Gods could carry that burden? Back when the Pillars of Heaven collapsed and the power from Pangu's[25] creation of the world started fading, spiritual power became rarer and rarer in the Mortal Realm. The wu[26] and yao[27] tribes declined one after another. There is no one to rely on after the Mountain God." Very low, the Magistrate added, "And back then, the Mountain God had no choice."

The reaper was aghast. "But in essence, the Soul-Executing Emissary is half a Primordial God. The Mountain God was the last one who could control him. If he ever betrays us, what do we do?"

The Magistrate said nothing for a while. The toll of the death bell sounded from the banks of the Huangquan. There was no breeze, but countless red spider lilies swayed and rustled. A bone-piercing cold emanated from the Netherworld, and thousands upon thousands of souls were flung about in the endless Cycle of Reincarnation.

A sigh came from the Yanluo Courts. "Then we can only try to wake the Mountain God."

Chapter 14

THE TEMPERATURE in Dragon City dropped practically overnight as winter arrived that year. The leaves were still caught between green and yellow when they fell. Zhao Yunlan didn't mind at all. He'd finally managed to get a date with Shen Wei and was riding high, as if buoyed by a spring breeze.

He'd styled his hair early in the day, and his knee-length coat was crisply ironed. The stylish look highlighted his broad shoulders and slim waist, lending him the gallantry of an immortal tree standing against the wind. Just as he was about to set out, this fine specimen of a tree remembered the final touch and gave his neck a quick spritz of Oud Wood cologne. Satisfied that he was a feast for all the senses, he strode off to inflict himself on the world.

He reached the restaurant precisely on time. It was an upscale Western spot designed with exquisite taste. A small band played leisurely in one corner, filling the space with pleasant, laid-back music. The tables were spaced for an intimate dining experience. The room was dim, but each table sat in a single soft pool of light that made their vases of Peach Avalanche roses glow. At this time of year, there was a steady procession of Western holidays. Thanksgiving and Christmas ushered in the busy season for Western restaurants, and this one, while it didn't go easy on the wallet, was bustling. Each beam of light illuminated a table with a couple whispering to each other.

Zhao Yunlan spotted his date immediately. Shen Wei was seated at an isolated corner table, staring at the edge of the tablecloth, lost in thought. The light and music didn't quite seem to reach him somehow. Half of his face was shadowed, leaving only his blurred side profile visible. There was such a tinge of loneliness and melancholy about him that Zhao Yunlan's breath caught in his throat.

His steps were silent as he walked over, moving in time with the violin, but his arrival shattered the bubble of quiet surrounding Shen Wei. "Have you been waiting long?"

Shen Wei twitched, tension overwriting his relaxed posture. Zhao Yunlan leaned forward slightly as he sat, making sure that the warm, woody fragrance in his scarf saturated the air around Shen Wei. Then he backed off into his own space at once, unbuttoning his coat. "Am I that scary? Why does seeing me make you so nervous?"

Shen Wei, studying him from outside the pool of light, forced a smile. He stole a few quick glances, then looked away. "Officer Zhao, you're always teasing me."

Zhao Yunlan casually accepted the menu from the waiter. "This restaurant has a nice atmosphere, but I don't know if it's to your tastes, Shen-laoshi? Are there any foods you don't eat?"

Shen Wei touched a corner of the proffered menu, pushing it lower.

"Hmm?" Zhao Yunlan looked up from perusing the options, arching an eyebrow. He had very defined features; when his eyes were shadowed by the bridge of his nose and his brow, it gave an impression of tenderness.

Tension tightened Shen Wei's cheeks. Seeming to come to a decision, he picked up something from beside him and set it carefully on the table: the box of

ancient tomes Zhao Yunlan had given him the day before.

Zhao Yunlan was a smart man. Just from that silent opening, he knew what was coming. It was suddenly hard to maintain his cool, confident air.

"I, ah…" Shen Wei's voice cracked. "I have only the greatest admiration for you, Officer Zhao." He cleared his throat before continuing. "But I may have inadvertently—perhaps I somehow gave the wrong impression. I'm very sorry."

All along, Zhao Yunlan's narcissistic assumption had never wavered. Now he was broadsided by the declaration that it had all been in his head.

Shen Wei's glasses must've been antiques. With no anti-glare coating, they reflected enough light that his eyes were effectively hidden. "It's not a big deal," he continued. "But I feel terrible that you spent so much money, Officer Zhao. I thought… I thought it best to clear things up as soon as possible."

Oh, Zhao Yunlan thought. *It was all in my head… I misinterpreted his attempts to turn me down.*

Even in the mini-society of elementary school, he'd been clever and perceptive—an expert at dealing with other people. He could pick up on anyone's intentions from a few words, and he'd always been right. It had been years and years since he'd been in such an awkward situation.

It felt like having a chunk of ice stuck in his chest, a hard, frozen lump he couldn't swallow or spit out. The notes of oud wood now smelled like damp rot. In an effort to keep up appearances, he gave a self-deprecating chuckle and put a hand on the box of books.

"It wasn't a lot of money, honestly. I really did get them from someone else, and I definitely have nowhere to put them. Please keep them. There's no need to waste something precious."

"I—" Shen Wei began.

Zhao Yunlan raised a hand to stop him. Half joking, he said, "Have you heard that awkwardness and embarrassment are the top two negative human emotions? Realizing that I just imagined there was something between us combines them, so it's extra hard to swallow, Shen-laoshi. Can you give me some time to digest it? And take pity on me—taking these home would be even more awkward for me. Maybe you can donate them to the university library. I'll think of it as a contribution to the education system."

"…I'm sorry," said Shen Wei.

"None of that, all right? It just makes me feel worse. We're on the same page now, so everything's fine." There was a subtle transformation in Zhao Yunlan's body language as he leaned back. There was no trace of ambiguous flirtatiousness left. With one casual gesture, he'd become a warm, friendly older brother. "After harassing you for so long, the least I can do is treat you to a meal." Shen Wei opened his mouth, but Zhao Yunlan gestured for him to stop. He snapped his fingers to summon the waiter, leaving no room for argument. "Just go with it."

Zhao Yunlan was a master at controlling the mood, turning candor on with the flip of a switch. Shen Wei was uneasy at first, but soon they were chatting about the aftermath of Li Qian's case. By the time they'd finished eating, they seemed like a pair of friendly acquaintances. The excruciating awkwardness from earlier, like a slow-motion car crash, had been washed away.

When they went their separate ways, Zhao Yunlan even managed to joke around. “You had a little to drink, so I should take you home, but since you’re not letting me pursue you, I’ll just remind you to call a chauffeur service to get you and your car home. Speaking as a cop: don’t drink and drive, and if you’re going to drive, don’t drink. They’re extra strict about it at the end of the year. Don’t make me go looking for you at the station.”

Zhao Yunlan left with a flourish, maintaining his free-spirited image right to the end. It wasn’t until he got into his car that he deflated. Frustrated, he ran his fingers roughly through his gelled hair, then smoked three cigarettes in a row. He was genuinely a bit upset. He’d been overconfident about landing Shen Wei, and learning he was wrong felt like a slap in the face.

It was also clear to him now that his feelings for Shen Wei were sincere.

But falling for someone was no big deal, he reminded himself. In the big city, it could happen eight times a day. If someone wasn’t interested, you backed off. You didn’t get clingy or make a scene. That was basic social etiquette.

“Well, this is a shitshow,” he said.

When the light turned green, Zhao Yunlan stubbed out his cigarette in the car’s ashtray. His dinner was sitting heavily in his chest; between that and the cold wind, he was both uncomfortable and annoyed. When he was a little slow stepping on the gas, the car behind him honked repeatedly. Its horn sounded like a croaking toad. Zhao Yunlan cursed, opened his window, and gave the “toad” the finger.

After that, there were several days where Zhao Yunlan just wasn’t in the mood to go out. He went straight home after work each day and lazed around.

He had moved out of his parents’ home when he was fairly young and bought himself a little apartment—forty square meters or so—in the heart of the city. It was a classic bachelor existence: he made himself presentable to face the world, but the apartment was a disaster zone. Everything about his home felt frivolous.

When the weekend rolled around and Zhao Yunlan had been AWOL from everything but work for a whole week, his friends came and excavated him. They all drank until his soul left his body. Once he’d dragged himself home, he was out cold until noon the next day.

Then it was Sunday. Having no plans, Zhao Yunlan scrounged up half a piece of ancient stale bread and cold water and called that breakfast and lunch. Then he got comfy on his beanbag chair, which he shared with six or seven unmatched socks, and gamed online until well past dinnertime.

Finally, after it was completely dark out, there was a familiar stab of pain in his stomach. He surfaced from the internet and came back to the real world.

There were medications he usually kept at home, but he’d run out. He felt too lazy to move, so he just drank some hot water and decided to push through it. Unfortunately, his stomach had other plans. The cramping got worse and worse until he was drenched in cold sweat, leaving him no choice but to dig out his coat and a pair of pants. Zhao Yunlan yanked them over his pajamas without bothering with socks and ventured out into the world, not remotely presentable.

He followed the familiar route to the little restaurant at the entrance to his neighborhood, where he ordered a bowl of century egg and pork congee with a few

side dishes. While the side dishes were being made to order, he headed to the nearest supermarket and pharmacy to pick up cigarettes and medication. It was only eight or nine hundred meters between the pharmacy and the restaurant.

Zhao Yunlan was badly underdressed and the icy wind kept licking under his sleeves and collar, so he decided to cut through a little backstreet that got him out of the wind. It took him past a cramped alley with three streetlamps, only one of which was lit. As he hurried by in the dark, shivering, he suddenly heard voices.

A man was cursing, sounding thoroughly drunk. “Get out your money! Move! Don’t fucking waste my time!”

Another voice said, “Don’t blame us. Times are hard. With nice clothes like that, you’re obviously rich. It’s almost Lunar New Year. I’m sure we all want to stay safe, right?”

Zhao Yunlan frowned. The New Year was approaching. Dragon City had residents of all stripes, both good and bad. Public Security clearly wasn’t doing so well if he was running right into a mugging.

He narrowed his eyes, counting three or four thugs, all carrying prohibited knives, surrounding a lone man—a familiar lone man, and not one he wanted to see: *Shen Wei*. What a fucking coincidence!

Shen Wei was clearly too good-natured. It was one thing to treat friends as warmly as he did, and quite another to react similarly when attacked. He was a fully grown man, yet he didn’t resist at all? He didn’t even speak a word of protest, just obediently took out his wallet!

The thugs exchanged glances, realizing they had a natural-born victim on their hands. Things immediately escalated. “Your watch too!”

Still without saying a word, Shen Wei removed his watch.

Zhao Yunlan sighed, unable to stand it anymore. Hands shoved into his pockets, he stalked over. His approach was silent and concealed by darkness.

A mugger grabbed Shen Wei’s watch and shoved him, making him stumble. When his back hit the wall, a red cord peeked out from his collar. “Hey!” one thug said. “What’s that around his neck?”

Another one grabbed Shen Wei’s collar, ripping it open. A small pendant was exposed between his collarbones. It was thumbnail-sized and made of a material he’d never seen before. Under the dim streetlight, it glowed in a blinding array of colors.

“What kind of gem is that?” The thug couldn’t tear his eyes from the pendant. He reached out to grab it.

This was a step too far for Shen Wei, who had shown childlike obedience so far. Wrapping his hand around the pendant, he said, “I’ve given you my money and watch. Don’t push your luck.”

His expression suddenly darkened, like a dough figurine coming to life. The thug gripping his collar belatedly realized that the eyes looking back at him were a bottomless black, glowing with a cold light. That gaze inexplicably struck fear into them, and the thug found himself letting go.

Seeing that, his companion raised a hand and aimed for Shen Wei’s head. Experience told him this was the best way to deal with people who wore glasses: an unexpected blow to the head, followed by a kick in the gut after their glasses flew off.

This plan was derailed when someone planted a fierce kick on his back before he could even swing at Shen Wei. Pain flared in the thug's chest, nearly making him cough up blood. He flailed forward. Shen Wei twisted to the side to avoid him, and the thug smacked into the wall like a pancake, limbs askew.

Stunned, Shen Wei looked up to see Zhao Yunlan only three steps away, face pale from the cold. Zhao Yunlan shivered, blowing on his hands to warm them. "You guys sure have a lot of spare time if you're pulling this on such a cold night."

His kick had been powerful enough to send the man reeling. The thugs were briefly shocked into silence, but one finally opened his mouth. "Who… Who are you? I'm warning you! Mind your own business!"

Zhao Yunlan tilted his head, neck cracking. An icy smile spread across his face, revealing his dimples.

Five minutes later, he was on the phone with the nearest police station, telling them to hurry up and collect the perps. After hanging up, he nudged a fallen thug with his toe. "I was hustling while you were still in diapers. Make sure you know whose territory you're in next time, okay?"

The thug he was stepping on screamed pitifully. "Aiyou! Da… Dage, we… We… Aaaaah!"

"Who the fuck are you calling 'dage'?" Zhao Yunlan kicked him again. "You sure do know how to take any opportunity to save yourself, huh? Take off your belt! Hurry up!"

He bound the lot of them to a streetlamp with the ease of long experience, then retrieved Shen Wei's wallet and watch. Handing them back, he asked, "Are you okay?"

Shen Wei dusted himself off elegantly as he took his things. "Thanks."

Of its own volition, Zhao Yunlan's gaze came to rest on Shen Wei's pendant. It was a hollow crystal sphere, illuminated by something inside. It might have been made from some sort of fluorescent material. Zhao Yunlan had never seen such a warm, unique light. He almost felt as if the sphere contained a living flame. For no reason he could discern, his heart flooded with familiarity and fondness.

It wasn't until Shen Wei covered it with a hand that Zhao Yunlan realized he'd been staring for far too long. He quickly looked away. "What a coincidence all this is," he said lightly. "If someone didn't know better, they'd think I'd planned this myself."

Shen Wei shot him a confused look, not getting the joke.

Zhao Yunlan spread his hands wide. "So I could be the knight in shining armor saving the damsel in distress, to make sure you remember I exist."

Shen Wei burst out laughing, then looked at the thugs Zhao Yunlan had strung up like kebabs. "They have it hard too."

"If I don't teach them a lesson, they'll think they can go around biting anyone. Don't worry about them. There isn't that much space in lockup, so they won't be in there long." He turned to the thugs. "Don't let me see you guys again! You'll be in trouble if I do. You hear me?"

Having put the fear of god into them, Zhao Yunlan turned and let his arm hover near Shen Wei's shoulders, politely avoiding contact. "I'll walk you home. Do you

live in the area too? How come I've never seen you around before?"

Shen Wei's eyes shadowed. Quietly, he said, "In a city this large, two people could live in the same neighborhood and never meet. That's what it means to not share fate, I suppose."

As he spoke, Shen Wei fell half a step behind. Out of Zhao Yunlan's line of sight, something unnatural entered his gaze. Behind his glasses, his eyes were dark and incomprehensible. He stared at Zhao Yunlan's back in a way that was almost yearning, hinting at greed held barely in check.

But all he said was, "This area has always been quite safe. What happened was a rare occurence. There's no need for you to walk me home on such a cold night, Officer Zhao."

Zhao Yunlan didn't insist. He just led him out of the dark alleyway to where the streetlamps offered more light. Here and there they were passed by a car or a pedestrian rushing home late in the night; in the distance, there was the occasional flash of a neon light in the business district.

With a wave, Zhao Yunlan said, "Okay, the areas ahead are less sketchy, so I won't escort you. Get home safely."

Shen Wei held his briefcase and nodded in farewell, maintaining a polite distance. "Thanks."

The two of them parted ways at the intersection, heading in different directions like two lines that would never meet. In older times, people had lived in small, bleak villages or within city walls where everyone knew everyone else. But now, it took a hundred years of good karma to persuade fate to bring two people together for even a moment. In the modern world, millions upon millions of people inhabited the same city without ever making contact. Fate, it seemed, had depreciated over time.

Shen Wei headed down his own path for a bit, his expression cold. At the corner, he couldn't resist a final glance back. With a start, he realized that Zhao Yunlan hadn't left. Instead, he was doubled over, one hand resting on a wall while the other clutched the left side of his abdomen.

Chapter 15

THE PAIN in Zhao Yunlan's gut came in waves. Maybe he'd overdone it while coming to a certain beauty's rescue, or maybe he'd just been out breathing the frigid air too long, but whatever the reason, this flare-up felt like someone had taken a blender to his innards. His hands and feet felt like blocks of ice, and his vision was fading in and out.

He was starting to suspect he'd have to resort to calling 120 for emergency help when suddenly someone's hands were steadying him. A panicked voice by his ear demanded, "What's wrong?"

Shen Wei?

Cold sweat beaded on Zhao Yunlan's temples. He couldn't speak, but heard Shen Wei saying, "I'm taking you to the hospital."

Zhao Yunlan grunted and slid down to the ground, unwilling to move. Once the wave of pain passed, he gave his jacket pocket a weak pat. "It's fine. I have medicine."

"Absolutely not!"

Zhao Yunlan finally managed to catch a breath. *Where was all this energy when he was getting mugged?*

"It's a chronic condition," he explained evenly. "It won't kill me, and there's no quick fix. If I go to the hospital, they'll just put me through an endoscopy and a biopsy, and once they're done torturing me, they'll prescribe the same kinds of medication I already have and give a speech about healthier habits. Trust me, I know. I've gotten the royal treatment there plenty of times. Just… Just help me up. Thanks."

He made it back to his feet with Shen Wei's help, wrapped his coat more tightly around himself, and started toward the little restaurant to pick up his food.

Shen Wei's brow furrowed. "Where are you going in this condition?"

"To get the takeout I just…" Zhao Yunlan paused, then finished, "…ordered. How did you know I don't live in this direction?"

Shen Wei startled. Under the ghostly white streetlight, there was so little color in his cheeks that he could have been sculpted from snow. Zhao Yunlan seemed to have realized something. A disbelieving look flashed across his sweat-drenched face. The air between them was suddenly charged.

After a solid half minute, Shen Wei said stiffly, "I didn't…think anyone lived in that direction."

He said this while pointing directly toward not one but three long-established residential neighborhoods. So many people lived in that direction, in fact, that it was one of the most notorious areas in Dragon City for traffic jams.

Zhao Yunlan's response was even stiffer. "I see."

"Let me take you home," Shen Wei said. "Call the restaurant and have them pack everything up. I'll pick it up for you later."

"Actually—" Zhao Yunlan began, but Shen Wei interrupted.

“Stop dallying. Aren’t you cold?”

The walk home was an adventure in awkwardness. Shen Wei was clearly distracted, while Zhao Yunlan was ill at ease. Neither of them was feeling talkative. Mercifully, it was only several hundred meters or a couple thousand steps to their destination. Shen Wei took down the restaurant’s address and phone number, then told Zhao Yunlan to head upstairs.

It wasn’t until Shen Wei had almost turned and left that Zhao Yunlan finally called out helpfully, “I live on the ninth floor, by the way.” Shen Wei’s back went ramrod stiff. Accidentally making it worse, he added, “Apartment 902. First door on the left when you get off the elevator.”

Shen Wei straight-up fled.

Zhao Yunlan watched Shen Wei disappear into the night, then dragged himself to his apartment, practically at a crawl. Once inside, he sat on the bench in his entryway. He didn’t turn on the lights or pour himself a glass of water. He just lit a cigarette. Its orange glow flickered between his fingers.

The very first time they’d met, Shen Wei had avoided his gaze aggressively enough to seem suspicious. Then on the rooftop, Shen Wei had pulled him back up with incredible care. From then on, no matter how hard he’d tried to get close to Shen Wei, he’d been met with avoidance and finally a face-to-face rejection.

Calmer now, Zhao Yunlan mentally reviewed that scene in the restaurant. Had Shen Wei seemed to find it awkward? No. It had seemed much more like the rejection had hurt *him*.

And now it turned out Shen Wei knew where he lived.

What does this mean? Zhao Yunlan thought. *Did he investigate me at some point? Or stalk me?*

The *what* of the situation was unimportant. Zhao Yunlan’s address wasn’t a national secret. Anyone who wanted to find it out would be able to. But *why* did Shen Wei do it at all? Had he been so afraid Zhao Yunlan would do something indecent that he’d wanted to find Zhao Yunlan’s home base before calling backup to deal with him?

Or…

He was still smoking and rolling the whole question around in his muddled mind for the three-hundredth time when the doorbell rang. He startled, as though someone had struck his heart with a riding crop and made it break into a full gallop; that in turn made his temples throb painfully.

His hands reacted faster than his brain and pulled the door open. Only then did he realize that his limbs were numb from sitting for so long, and worse, that he hadn’t had a chance to clean up his pigsty of a home. It wasn’t remotely fit for guests, but it was too late for regret.

“You…” Shen Wei began, just as Zhao Yunlan said, “I…”

They opened and closed their mouths at the same time. Then, while they were staring at each other, the floor shook beneath them. The entryway’s hanging light swung dramatically, and a black cat figurine fell off the edge of the shoe cabinet. Only Zhao Yunlan’s fast reflexes saved it. “An earthquake?” he asked.

Dragon City was on a flat plain, nowhere near volcanoes or regular seismic activity. Most of its residents likely didn't know even the most basic steps for disaster preparedness. The building's hallway stayed quiet. No one even poked their head out to take a look.

The shaking lasted for what felt like an unusually long time. It wasn't terribly strong, but it seemed to go on forever. An unspeakable feeling welled up in Zhao Yunlan's chest—the sensation of jerking awake after stumbling in a midnight dream, heart skipping a beat.

Something…

Something had surfaced into the world.

Zhao Yunlan's ears buzzed. He unthinkingly took a step forward, as though drawn by something. Shen Wei threw an arm across the doorway to stop him. Zhao Yunlan came back to himself with a start and met Shen Wei's gaze, which was heavy with a bitingly cold light to it. He was a completely different person from the scholar who'd obediently handed his wallet over to muggers.

"The shaking's stopped," Shen Wei said. "Be careful."

Zhao Yunlan eyed him suspiciously, and Shen Wei's ears flushed bright red. He avoided Zhao Yunlan's gaze stiffly. The intent in Shen Wei's eyes a moment before might have been a trick of the light.

"I…" said Shen Wei, as Zhao Yunlan said, "Please come in."

They spoke over each other again. Enough things had happened that day that Shen Wei seemed resigned to his fate. After only a moment's hesitation, he nodded.

Zhao Yunlan hadn't turned on the lights, so he tripped over the open umbrella at the door. Winter rain was unusual in Dragon City; it must have been at least a month since the last rainfall. An owner who hadn't yet put it away was lazy enough that you might find mushrooms growing on him. Once the light was on, a second glance revealed a bag of laundry from the laundromat up on top of the shoe cabinet. The tag on it was two days old, and the bag hadn't even been opened, probably because Zhao Yunlan hadn't yet needed any of these particular clothes.

Shen Wei scanned the room without comment. There was a shirt, a pair of pants, and a knit vest on the sofa. The bed was covered with a variety of books, with a laptop in sleep mode under them. All in all it was a masterpiece of mess with barely any clear space to set foot.

Zhao Yunlan apologized quickly, casually unearthing a spot on the sofa to sit. Before he could straighten up, a fresh wave of pain started in his belly.

"Don't worry about all that." Shen Wei set the takeout on the coffee table, sighed, then began moving the books on the bed. "Where do you normally put all this?"

"On the bed during the day, then on the floor at night."

After a brief pause of stunned silence, Shen Wei quickly sorted the books into two piles, after which he freed up some space on the equally disastrous desk and put the books there. Finally, he moved the computer to the nightstand. "Now lie down, and I'll go pour you some water… Where *is* your water?"

Zhao Yunlan, who had curled up like a shrimp, pointed to a little water dispenser in the kitchen. Despite his obvious misery, he was still tightly bundled up in

his coat as if ready to enter a beauty pageant for the sick. Exasperated, Shen Wei said, “Take off your jacket when you lie down. Aren’t you uncomfortable?”

“I’m afraid you’ll think I’m a pervert if I take it off.” The visible layer of cold sweat on Zhao Yunlan’s forehead, despite it being the dead of winter, betrayed how much pain he was in, but he was still a total smartass.

Shen Wei’s expression darkened. “Enough nonsense. Hurry up.”

Zhao Yunlan peeled off his jacket and pants with no further hesitation, leaving him lounging casually in front of Shen Wei in pajamas that revealed most of his chest and chiseled abs. Shen Wei’s face changed color as if it had been boiled.

Unabashed, Zhao Yunlan said, “You’re the one who told me to strip.”

Shen Wei looked away immediately. He put the pillow at the head of the bed and spread out the crumpled heap of blankets, eyes down all the while. “Give me your cup and I’ll go get—Zhao Yunlan, where are your socks?!”

Zhao Yunlan had taken off his shoes, revealing bare feet that were blue with cold. “I just stepped out for a minute to get medication,” he said matter-of-factly. “Wearing socks would mean I’d have to wash them.”

Any further explanation was cut off when Shen Wei bent down and grabbed hold of Zhao Yunlan’s feet. Shen Wei’s hands were always cold, but they were warm in comparison. Shocked, Zhao Yunlan instinctively tried to pull his feet back, but Shen Wei’s grip was too firm. Strong fingers began massaging his pressure points.

“Stop!” Zhao Yunlan yelped. “Stop, stop…! I-I haven’t even washed my feet today! Ah!”

Face serious, Shen Wei said, “Your qi and blood are stagnant and you live in complete chaos. That’s why you have stomach problems, you…” Suddenly realizing his tone was too familiar, Shen Wei dropped his gaze and shut up.

Zhao Yunlan’s feet were practically numb from Shen Wei’s massage, but wailing the way he wanted to would ruin his image. His lips went white from holding it in. After a while, though, his feet miraculously began to feel a bit warmer. Shen Wei finally released them and tucked them into his blankets.

Shen Wei went and washed his hands, brought over Zhao Yunlan’s medicine and some hot water, and watched as he swallowed it.

“Shameless” barely began to describe Zhao Yunlan’s pajamas. The top was only barely buttoned, lying open all the way to the bottom of his rib cage. When he pressed against his left side, the pajama top slipped even further and showed off his abs.

Shen Wei didn’t dare look again. To keep himself busy, he started opening the food, taking it to the kitchen to heat up.

The curtains of the apartment were all drawn. The garbage was essentially empty, with nothing inside but some torn-up bread packaging with an expiry date a week in the past. The fridge, upon investigation, was just as empty. There was only half a bag of cat food. Every pot and pan, piece of equipment, and appliance was brand new; some even still had their tags. Not a single cockroach could have survived in that pristine kitchen. It was practically a showroom model.

“You didn’t go out all day today,” Shen Wei said. “What did you eat?”

Zhao Yunlan pointed at the discarded bread packaging.

“For the whole day? What about yesterday?”

“I got blackout drunk yesterday,” said Zhao Yunlan, pressing his temples. “I don’t remember.”

Shen Wei wordlessly assessed the takeout. It appeared Zhao Yunlan had learned a few things from being sick so often—all the food he’d ordered was easy to digest and unlikely to cause further stomach problems. Shen Wei heated it all up, then prepared to leave.

At the door, he hesitated, then asked, “Officer Zhao, you aren’t getting any younger. You have a successful career. Aren’t you going to consider finding someone to take care of you?”

Zhao Yunlan spread his hands. “I considered you, but you declined.”

Shen Wei’s hands twitched nervously. He tucked them behind himself, where they curled into fists. “Stop joking. I’ll just… You get some rest.” Having said that, he made his escape.

Shen Wei seemed to be at the heart of a huge puzzle. After carelessly eating his fill, Zhao Yunlan took his laptop from the nightstand and logged into the Public Security internal system to search for Shen Wei’s file.

The file turned out to be both thorough and matter of fact. Shen Wei’s entire life was the very picture of “young and accomplished.” He’d attended a prestigious university where he’d completed his doctorate. After graduating, he was hired by his alma mater. He was unmarried. His father had passed away after an illness, and his mother had moved overseas after retiring. There was nothing remotely unusual about

him.

By the time Zhao Yunlan abandoned his research, it was nearly midnight. The streets were quiet. Most of the neighborhood's lights had gone dark, and there was almost no sound of traffic. The occasional light that reached the windows was blocked by the tightly shut curtains.

At the moment when the hour hand and minute hand aligned, a sudden sound came from Zhao Yunlan's Clarity. It was followed at once by the noise of a dageng[28] woodblock, signaling deep night. It grew closer and closer, louder and louder.

There came the sound of a man's voice, sometimes closer and sometimes farther away. He dragged out his words as he spoke. "Reapers are leading the way; all living souls stay away…"

Zhao Yunlan's curtains, which hadn't been opened for an entire day, parted of their own accord to reveal frost-covered glass. Faint white light radiated through the gap, waiting quietly outside.

Zhao Yunlan tugged the wide-open collar of his pajamas closed and threw on a jacket. "Come in."

As soon as he spoke, the window latch opened with a click. Piercing cold wind rushed in, blanketing Zhao Yunlan's exposed skin with goosebumps. Something like a person, carrying a white paper lantern, was right outside his window—his ninth-floor window. The "person," also made of paper, was the height of a human and had a pair of dull, drawn-on eyes. Their huge, bloody mouth opened almost from ear to ear. They could have competed in a beauty pageant with 4 Bright Avenue's very own lao-Wu.

Zhao Yunlan was unfazed. He took out a little ceramic pot, spirit money, and incense from the bottom drawer of his bedside table, as though he had done it many times. He stuck the incense into the pot's opening, lit the money, and finally nodded in greeting. "A small token of my respect."

The paper reaper's huge mouth moved stiffly, forming a semblance of a polite smile. Most humans in the Mortal Realm who could communicate with the dead had their sights set too high to pay attention to the little reapers of the Netherworld. This Guardian was more courteous than anyone else. Even if important, serious business slipped his mind, he never forgot these small formalities.

"Did Lord Reaper need something, coming this late at night?" Zhao Yunlan asked.

The paper reaper bowed, hands clasped, then politely said, "The Yanluo Kings were enraged by the Hunger Ghost's recent escape. We were ordered to thoroughly investigate the Three Realms. One by one, we inspected and verified all the living, the dead, and the souls waiting for their sentence, recorded it all, and incorporated it in the *Book of Life and Death.*[29] This lowly one has been sent by the Ten Yanluo Kings to bring a copy to the Guardian so that you might have something to refer to while upholding the law in the Mortal Realm."

While speaking, the paper reaper brought out a black leather notebook and held it out to Zhao Yunlan with both hands. It looked like an ordinary notebook bound in soft cowhide, but once in his hand, it was extraordinarily light. Zhao Yunlan hefted it, gave it a small pinch, then sniffed the pages.

"Fusang paper and hailong ink, *The Book of Life and Death* and the *Record of Merits*—one can learn anything about a person from before their life until after their

death, either by using an invocation talisman with their name and birth chart written on it or by burning a soul-tracking talisman wrapped around a strand of hair and letting the ashes melt into the book. Is that right?"

The paper reaper hastily said, "The Guardian is knowledgeable and has a good eye."

"No, no, I've seen this in an ancient text. In fact, I've suggested it to the Netherworld many times." Zhao Yunlan casually flipped through the notebook in his hand, faking a smile. "But nothing ever came of it, so I thought the materials might be hard to find or that the Lords might have some other plans."

That was always the way of things with the current Ten Yanluo Kings. The bureaucracy was even more impenetrable than that of the Mortal Realm. If there was nothing in it for them, they wouldn't rouse themselves to action; if anything happened, they'd drag things out. It was incredibly annoying. The Soul-Guarding Order and the Netherworld had bumped heads many times over the years, putting Zhao Yunlan in a constant tug-of-war with them while having to simultaneously work with them.

All that experience told him that the other side must be up to no good if they were suddenly being generous for no reason.

The paper reaper answered agreeably, pretending not to take his meaning. Zhao Yunlan gave them a piercing glance. Just then, a thin piece of paper fell from the book.

"An arrest warrant?"

The blank piece of rice paper changed the instant it came in contact with his hand. Black mist materialized on it, and then a face appeared within the mist. The face belonged to something like a human, but the head was large and hairless. Its back was hunched and its neck scrunched…and the face was full of warts. It was the creature the Soul-Executing Emissary had cut down on that rooftop while investigating the Reincarnation Dial.

So that was the real point of the visit. Face carefully blank, Zhao Yunlan asked, "What exactly am I looking at?"

The reaper rushed to answer, reciting obviously well-worn words. "This being is similar to a human, but is not human. It is called youchu and was born from the Chaos. It can speak the human tongue, but its disposition is violent and savage. It eats people and drinks souls for pleasure, and fears fire and light. Should the Guardian encounter it, you may kill it on sight, but please take extra care."

Youchu—

The reaper kept talking, with repeated emphasis on how to kill a youchu when you encountered one, but almost completely glossed over the creatures' origin. Zhao Yunlan was forced to interrupt. "Hold on—where did you just say they come from?"

Politely, the paper reaper repeated, "They are born from the Chaos."

They might as well have said nothing. In Chinese mythology, "Chaos" described the state of the world before Pangu split the sky from the ground, when the Heavens, Earth, time, and space were muddled together in one mass. By that logic, the Heavens, the Earth, and people were also born from the Chaos. Any monster with mysterious origins could be explained by "born from the Chaos."

Somehow the description “similar to a human, but not human” struck Zhao Yunlan as very interesting. “How come I’ve never heard of them before? Does it have anything to do with the ‘Great Seal’ that the Soul-Executing Emissary mentioned?”

“Evil is always one step ahead of good. These filthy things are endless.” It was clear that the paper reaper had frozen for a moment. Rather than answering the question, they were avoiding the topic. They lowered their head hastily. “This lowly one will take their leave.”

As the reaper finished speaking, the white paper lantern flickered a few times. Both the lantern and reaper vanished.

The cold wind immediately disappeared too. The curtains and windows closed themselves, and warm air soon filled the room. If it hadn’t been for the black leather-bound notebook in Zhao Yunlan’s hands and the little pot filled with ashes, everything might have been his imagination.

The Soul-Executing Emissary, the Four Hallowed Artifacts, youchu, the Netherworld’s evasiveness…

Zhao Yunlan lay face up on his bed. By now his blankets were no longer warm and he was once again covered in goosebumps. He found he couldn’t fall asleep. As the night deepened, so did his thoughts. Between the encounter with the paper reaper and his physical discomfort, he tossed and turned all night and didn’t sleep a wink.

So when the doorbell rang bright and early at seven o’clock, Zhao Yunlan felt like his eyelids had been completely glued together.

He crawled out of bed, so heavy-headed that it threw him off balance. His vision was dim, so he sat back down on the bed with great difficulty. His joints cracked and he ached all over. By the time he’d slowly made his way to the door, Zhao Yunlan had mentally skinned and slaughtered whoever was on the other side.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but he was something of a mad dog.

And then he opened the door, only to find himself face-to-face with Shen Wei, who was holding several large bags.

Zhao Yunlan froze for a few seconds while he tried to react. He immediately attempted to retract his man-eating expression and replace it with one more appropriate for welcoming the arrival of spring.

Unfortunately, he was still muddled enough that everything was just a bit…off. His features jammed, stuck between “man-eating” and “spring has sprung.”

If one *had* to describe it, they might say it bore an uncanny likeness to the Nian monster.[30]

Chapter 16

SEEING THAT Zhao Yunlan didn't look so good, Shen Wei freed up a hand to touch his forehead. "You're a bit feverish. What are you still standing here for? Go back to bed and get under the blankets."

Zhao Yunlan, dizzy, found himself being pushed into the bedroom.

Then Shen Wei grabbed his wrist. Zhao Yunlan was caught off guard and instinctively tried to pull free, but couldn't break Shen Wei's grip.

It was the second time that had happened. The first time had been on that roof at Dragon City University when Shen Wei had dragged him back up with only the strength of his arms. Shen Wei didn't have the weak hands of an academic. Instead, they were icy cold and frighteningly strong, callused between the thumb and pointer finger—not the kind of calluses that resulted from too much time using a mouse.

Having been a bit out of it from the fever, being startled had made Zhao Yunlan break out in a fresh layer of cold sweat. He was much more awake now. Shen Wei, however, didn't make any more unusual moves. He just checked Zhao Yunlan's pulse with the air of someone who knew what he was doing, then put warm water and medications for fever and stomach problems on the bedside table. "Drink some water and take the stomach medication, then rest. Don't mind me. I'll make you some food, and you can take the rest of the medicine after eating."

Zhao Yunlan absorbed this in silence. What kind of shoddy east-meets-west doctor prescribed western medication after just feeling his pulse?

But everything Shen Wei had brought was common over-the-counter medication; Zhao Yunlan was well acquainted with them from being sick so often. A quick glance at the labels was enough for him to decide that taking the meds wouldn't kill him. He washed them down decisively with water.

Shen Wei took some time to put away everything he'd brought with him. Then, once Zhao Yunlan's empty fridge was more than half-full, he took out a little clay pot, washed it, and prepared his ingredients. Once he'd mixed it all together and brought it to a boil, he lowered the heat so the food could simmer. Finally, he washed his hands and warmed them on the radiator.

Looking across the apartment, he saw Zhao Yunlan leaning against the headboard, eyes closed. Shen Wei unconsciously held his breath, drinking him in from a distance.

Zhao Yunlan's lips were a little dry, possibly because he was unwell and had slept poorly. Some of his hair was stuck to the pillow while some fell around his temples. It was softer than Shen Wei had imagined, giving Zhao Yunlan a tender air. Shen Wei's gaze slowly traced over the corners of his eyes and the lines of his brows, entranced.

He was jolted out of his reverie by the sound of the pot boiling. He quickly looked down and removed the lid, not realizing that Zhao Yunlan's eyes had opened.

"Shen Wei, you—" The unexpected sound of Zhao Yunlan's voice nearly made Shen Wei drop the lid on the stovetop. Zhao Yunlan's tone went stiff. "Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

“You’re sick and there’s no one to take care of you,” Shen Wei said. The unprompted explanation didn’t make things any less awkward. “Since we ran into each other, I thought I should at least come check on you, especially after you saved me yesterday.”

“So you’re here to repay me?”

After a pause, Shen Wei said, with some difficulty, “It’s what friends should do.”

Zhao Yunlan let himself thoroughly savor those five words. Whatever he tasted on them made him chuckle for some reason, leaving Shen Wei too nervous to do anything other than watch the pot on the stove.

It wasn’t until Zhao Yunlan had been quiet for a while that Shen Wei finally mustered up the courage to take another look. Zhao Yunlan, it turned out, had fallen asleep, perhaps because he was sick and exhausted, and possibly with an extra nudge from the medication.

Shen Wei exhaled silently and went to the bedside. Zhao Yunlan’s head was slightly tilted, and the shadows cast by his lashes gave the impression of even deeper sleep. Shen Wei reached out and caressed his face, then carefully eased him down to lie flat on the bed.

There was something like piety in Shen Wei’s gaze now. He clasped his hands tightly, as if to preserve the trace of Zhao Yunlan’s body heat on his palms. After a while, he smiled self-deprecatingly, then bent down and picked up a coat Zhao Yunlan had tossed aside.

That was when he saw an unusual ceramic pot on the floor. There was a layer of brown ash lining the bottom of it. Shen Wei pinched a bit of the ash and rubbed it between his fingers. The ash that fell from his skin turned white, as if the spirit of the wood had been sucked away.

“A reaper?” Shen Wei adjusted his glasses, looking at the tightly drawn curtains.

Zhao Yunlan hadn’t expected to fall asleep, but a deep slumber crept over him. When his eyes finally reopened, sunlight was already piercing his curtains. He was sweaty all over, and the blanket pressed stickily against him. It wasn’t at all comfortable. He even felt a little dizzy.

Eventually his nose registered the unfamiliar scent of food. He looked up and saw Shen Wei sitting nearby on the sofa, quietly leafing through an old book of supernatural folk tales. Fully absorbed in the book, Shen Wei was lovelier than words could describe. His face was like a painting given life.

Hearing Zhao Yunlan stir, Shen Wei looked up with a smile. “You’re awake. Do you feel better?”

“Awake” was a bit of an overstatement. Zhao Yunlan nodded, still in a daze. Shen Wei reached out and felt his forehead. “Your fever’s gone. Does your stomach still hurt?”

As he shook his head, Zhao Yunlan noticed that all the clothes he’d left scattered about were now folded and in a neat pile on the bedside table. He touched them experimentally and found them warm, as if Shen Wei had even heated them on the radiator. It felt unexpectedly comfortable.

“I figured you’d wake up soon,” said Shen Wei. “I’ve turned on the warming fan in the bathroom. You’ll feel even better once you’ve washed off all that sweat. I’ve cooked a few simple things for you to eat.” He sighed. “You should take better care of yourself.”

In an unexpected development, Zhao Yunlan felt a little embarrassed. Hugging his clothes to his chest, he got up and headed for the bathroom without a word.

Zhao Yunlan had moved out too young. His lifestyle was one of going out and rushing to social events or casually calling for takeout. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d woken up to the smell of home cooking and the sound of someone urging him to go wash up.

Once he’d showered and come back out in fresh clothes, he realized, dumbfounded, that his doghouse of an apartment had been cleaned within an inch of its life. His curtains were open, letting in the light, and it seemed like the windows had been opened at some point to let in fresh air. The temperature was a bit cool as a result, but the air was crisp and clean.

Shen Wei was just fishing the bamboo chopsticks that Zhao Yunlan had never even touched out of boiling water. He gave them a rinse in cool water and put them in the chopstick holder. Then he opened the small clay pot and tasted the contents with a little spoon. A rich fragrance wafted out.

For a moment, it was as if Zhao Yunlan’s pounding heart had taken wing.

Shen Wei turned off the heat and carried two simple home-cooked dishes from the kitchen. Zhao Yunlan moved as if to take them from him, but instead of taking hold of the food, he grabbed Shen Wei’s hand.

Even holding hot plates, Shen Wei’s hands were abnormally cold. Zhao Yunlan couldn’t help pressing his own hands even more tightly around them. Shen Wei shivered fiercely and tried to pull away.

“You…” Shen Wei started.

“Do you really not like me?” Zhao Yunlan pressed himself close and set the food aside, keeping Shen Wei from running away. “Shen Wei, look at me. Look right at me and say it again. Tell me you don’t like me.”

When Shen Wei abruptly looked up, the usual gentleness in his eyes was gone. Backed into a corner, he spoke almost harshly. “A man’s role is to marry a wife and have children. You’re still so young. You shouldn’t go against the natural order of things and human nature. It’s absurd.”

Zhao Yunlan was floored by this serious accusation. “Why are we suddenly escalating to ‘the natural order of things and human nature’?”

Shen Wei pulled his hand free. “How will you explain to your parents one day that you’re always getting tangled up with men? If your family line ends with you, when you enter the autumn of your life, who will care for you in your old age?”

Incredulous, Zhao Yunlan asked, “Explain what to whom? When I’m old I’ll take my pension and live in a retirement home. It’s not my job to keep the human race from going extinct, Shen-laoshi. Are you a closeted homophobe? Wake up! We’re not in the Qing Dynasty anymore!”

Shen Wei only stared back at him.

Zhao Yunlan studied him, unable to believe that someone so beautiful, such a joy for the eyes and mind alike, was such a pedantic old scholar at heart. “Just because someone’s straight doesn’t mean they’ll find a suitable partner. Getting married doesn’t guarantee being able to have a child. Having a kid doesn’t mean they’ll make it to adulthood, and if they do, you have no way of knowing what they’ll be like when they grow up. Where’s the sense in taking such a huge gamble, investing in such a high-risk product just so it can bring honor upon your family and take care of you in your old age? You’re better off buying a lottery ticket. If you really like kids, you can sponsor a few needy children. Then during the holidays there’ll be someone willing to come see you.”

Shen Wei had nothing to say to this preposterous reasoning. His expression was wooden.

“We’re all human,” Zhao Yunlan continued. “When we’re in pain, we have to think carefully to keep from repeating the same mistakes. But when we’re happy, we need to think less, not risk ruining our joy by overthinking things. Imagine if the world was ending and everyone became zombies. Imagine how you’d feel as you closed your eyes for the last time and realized you’d never let yourself have what you really wanted. How much would that suck?”

Very low, Shen Wei said, “There aren’t that many times where a person can freely give in to their desires.”

“Exactly!” Zhao Yunlan spread his hands. “Other people will deny you things. Are you going to deny yourself things too? What’s the point in living, then? Why not just die and get it over with?”

“Don’t speak nonsense.”

Confident now, Zhao Yunlan said, “So you *do* like me.”

Shen Wei turned to leave, and Zhao Yunlan wasn’t able to keep a grip on him. “Shen Wei, what’s the point in running? Sure, you can run from what I’m saying, but can you run away from your heart?”

His words chased Shen Wei like wild beasts. If he could have, Shen Wei would have thrown a smoke bomb and flung himself to the ground.

As soon as Shen Wei was gone, Zhao Yunlan moved to the window to wait. About three minutes later, he saw Shen Wei hurry out of the building. Not afraid of the cold, Zhao Yunlan pushed open the window and leaned halfway out. He was suddenly certain that Shen Wei would turn back to look at him.

No sooner did he have that thought than Shen Wei glanced up at his window, caught red-handed. Zhao Yunlan shaped his hands into a heart and aimed it toward the man below. Hundreds of flowers of the heart, in full bloom, erupted from the corners of his pale lips. They rained down on Shen Wei, battering him.

Zhao Yunlan stayed there until Shen Wei was out of sight. Then he appreciatively ate his steaming hot food, comforted in heart and stomach.

We have plenty of time, he thought confidently. *You can’t run.*

Chapter 17

ON MONDAY MORNING, the smell of breakfast filled the office. Zhu Hong had bought three pounds of buns from the cafeteria, their delicate skins nearly bursting with filling. The aroma could have lured people from two miles away. Everyone who had missed breakfast after waking up late followed their noses over, even the elusive Director Zhao.

Shen Wei urging him to stop smoking, drinking, and eating greasy food was a distant memory. Zhao Yunlan scarfed down a bun in two bites, then rapped Guo Changcheng on the head with an oily paw. “Kid, go turn on the news.”

Guo Changcheng obediently darted off.

Watching him go, Zhu Hong said smugly, “Xiao-Guo’s a good kid who’s thoughtful and works hard. He’s just a little too nervous. He doesn’t dare eat food from anyone but me.”

“That makes sense,” Zhao Yunlan said. “He’s scared of humans.”

Zhu Hong started to nod and then realized what he was implying.

Just to be absolutely sure she understood, Zhao Yunlan kindly added, “He’s not afraid of you because he doesn’t see you as human.”

Zhu Hong had no reply for that.

Just then, she saw Daqing climb stealthily up onto the desk. Daqing watched carefully, and at the very moment Zhao Yunlan was about to gobble up another one, he delivered one speedy, perfectly aimed smack, sending the filling flying out of Zhao Yunlan’s bun. Daqing caught the filling in midair, then flipped backward 360 degrees and landed on the floor. The entire sequence of movements was as smooth and natural as passing clouds and flowing water. You could almost forget his massive bulk.

Then Daqing strolled off, butt swaying and tail upright. Zhao Yunlan was left gaping and holding the empty bun skin, dripping with oil.

“Damn cat!”

“You deserved that,” Zhu Hong said.

The TV morning news was talking about the earthquake that had happened Saturday evening. The office quieted. The earthquake’s epicenter had been in a sparsely populated mountain region. Not much had been affected. As of yet, there was no reported property damage or loss of lives.

Stuffing the bun skin into his mouth, Zhao Yunlan casually said, “The earthquake two days ago, right? The city sure shook. It must’ve been at least a level 4.”

When no one responded, he looked around and found everyone giving him strange looks. “What?” he asked.

“Boss, are you still half-asleep?” Zhu Hong asked. “The epicenter was in the northwest, and it was a level 5. It was way too far from Dragon City for you to have

felt anything."

Zhao Yunlan paid closer attention to the news report and realized she was right. It had been a small earthquake, half the width of China away from them. "Then maybe something else caused the shaking I felt? It was around 9 p.m. on Saturday and really strong. None of you felt it? I guess you all live on lower floors. I'm on the ninth floor."

"I live on the sixteenth floor," said Lin Jing. "I was still awake at nine and didn't feel a thing."

Zhu Hong said, "I'm on the twelfth floor. Xiao-Guo, did you feel anything?"

Before Guo Changcheng could respond, Chu Shuzhi glanced up. "Wang Zheng?" he said, surprised. "Why are you out during the day?"

Zhu Hong jumped up. "Close the curtains! She can't come in contact with sunlight!"

Guo Changcheng and Lin Jing rushed to draw the curtains, tripping over each other. The office was suddenly so dark that it could have been dawn or dusk. After finishing his buns, Daqing hurled himself at the wall and kicked the light switch on.

Wang Zheng's complexion was pale to the point of transparent. She only dared float in once every sliver of sunlight had been blocked out. Curled up in a chair, she looked like she was on the verge of dissipating. Lin Jing grabbed incense from his drawer, lit it, and held it under her nose. "Hurry, breathe some of the smoke."

Once half of the incense had burned, she finally recovered a little. She exhaled lightly, looking a bit more substantial and less like a phantom shadow.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Zhao Yunlan smacked her on the forehead, girl or not. He actually made contact; the smack pushed her head back. "Are you tired of life or something? If so, I'll book you in at a tanning salon to give you a beautiful glow!"

Guo Changcheng had never seen his boss angry like this. He shivered in fright.

With some difficulty, Wang Zheng raised an arm and pointed at the TV. The news report was now showing the rescue team and a reporter in the mountain village near the epicenter of the quake. They were taking stock of the situation.

The earthquake had been centered in the northwest. The roads in that area were very poor, and few people lived there. The screen showed a handful of scattered dirt houses. It was unclear if they were inhabited, but they all looked intact. The earthquake really hadn't been very serious.

At the village's entrance was an old, worn stone tablet that read "Qingxi Village."

There was a certain mistiness to Wang Zheng's gaze that always made her seem a little out of it, as if she couldn't focus very well. Through that mist, her eyes were fixed on that stone tablet. It wasn't until the camera panned away that she whispered, "That's where my…"

Where her home is? Guo Changcheng thought.

"That's where my bones are buried." Her declaration sent a small, chilly breeze through the office.

"Director Zhao, I want to ask for some time off," she continued, in her unique, wispy voice. "I want to be laid to rest."

Zhao Yunlan's brow creased. He took out a cigarette. "You—"

Wang Zheng leaned back. Flatly, she said, "Keep your secondhand smoke away from me."

"You're a ghost. What does it matter to you?"

"Ghosts can still smell cigarette smoke. At this rate, sooner or later you'll become a human mosquito coil."

Zhao Yunlan stuffed his lighter back into his pocket unhappily. "Your name is already in the Soul-Guarding Order. You're never going to pass on. Even if you're laid to rest, you won't be at peace, so what's the point? And your people don't even do in-ground burials, do they?"

Wang Zheng didn't answer. She just kept her head down and eventually repeated, "I want to go home."

Zhao Yunlan sighed. "Wanting to go is one thing. How do you plan on getting there?"

"I haven't decided."

Impatiently, he asked, "Are you planning on thinking about it in broad daylight?"

Wang Zheng stopped talking altogether.

Zhao Yunlan glanced at the images of the dilapidated Qingxi Village. Somehow, that stone tablet seemed to call to him. The weird earthquake that none of the others had felt, that faraway sound by his ear…

He raised his hand, then lowered it. To Wang Zheng, he said, "Here, hide in Clarity for a while. You can come out at night. Let me think of something."

Wang Zheng had already reached her limits. She immediately turned into a wisp of white smoke and vanished into his watch.

Curious, Chu Shuzhi asked, "Director Zhao, you're usually lazy enough to grow sprouts, always sending other people on work trips. What's making you go yourself this time?"

"Fuck off." Zhao Yunlan grabbed another bun and stuffed it into his mouth. "This is what's known as leading by example."

Shen Wei had finished his final morning class, and the students were drifting out of the room. He stayed at the podium, organizing lesson plans on the table.

Sunlight came flooding in, momentarily blinding him. Shen Wei's hands stilled. Looking down, he saw a golden thread of light hooking in from somewhere outside, wrapping itself around his pendant. He reached to block it, but his fingers passed right through. He couldn't help gripping the radiant little sphere, his heart a tangled mess.

The whole day, it had been as if the sight of Zhao Yunlan leaning against the headboard, eyes closed, had been seared into his retinas. Any time he shut his own eyes, the image floated to the forefront of his mind. It haunted him.

It was as if, after freezing and starving for thousands of years, he had suddenly fallen into an untouchable, tender haven—a haven where everything around him held deathly temptation and swallowed his reason, no matter how he struggled against it.

Every time the words “Zhao Yunlan” drifted into his ear, he sank an inch deeper into the bottomless quagmire. He was already in past his neck. Soon, he would drown…

“Shen-laoshi!”

Shen Wei’s eyes snapped open. He just barely managed to keep his expression neutral, forcing himself to focus. “What is it?”

It was one of his students. He opened a document folder. “Laoshi, here’s the itinerary for our ancient customs field research trip. Can you check it over?”

Shen Wei took off his glasses, pinching the bridge of his nose. “It’s only been two days since the earthquake there. It’s probably not safe. Would you consider delaying the trip for a year?”

“We looked into it. It was only a level 5 earthquake. The houses didn’t even collapse.” The student pulled up the news on their phone, and urgently continued explaining. “All the young people from the area work in urban centers, so the only people still living in Qingxi Village are the elderly and disabled. There are so few people left to begin with. I’m afraid the earthquake will make those last few people want to move away too, and then how will we ever find them? We’ve already submitted our initial report and research plan, and we still have several other places to visit after this. If we delay any more, it’ll affect next year’s biannual review.”

Shen Wei’s gaze rested on the words “Qingxi Village.”

“Very well. We’ll follow the original plan and leave on Wednesday. Make sure you all prepare thoroughly, and don’t bring anyone who’s not directly involved. I can’t take care of you all myself.”

No one had seen Zhao Yunlan all day. In the evening, nearly at the end of the workday, he finally called the office. Lin Jing and Zhu Hong had already run off in the boss’s absence. Daqing lay sound asleep behind a computer’s cooling vents. Chu Shuzhi, expression stiff as a coffin, was playing Minesweeper and ignoring everything else.

That left Guo Changcheng to pick up the phone. “Hello?”

“Xiao-Guo?” Zhao Yunlan asked. “Are you busy? If not, do me a favor.”

“Of course!” Guo Changcheng replied quickly. “What is it?”

“The hostile energy inside Clarity—my watch—is too intense. Wang Zheng can’t stay in there for too long. I need to figure out a way to bring her out of town with me in a few days, so I need to find her a body. Go online and buy me a human-sized doll—something on the bigger side. It’d be best if it can move.

“Make sure you find one from a store right here in Dragon City and tell them it’s urgent. We need it delivered by tomorrow.”

Guo Changcheng nodded, phone jammed between his shoulder and ear as he did a search. “Director Zhao, I found one. Human-sized, flexible joints, can stand…”

Things seemed busy on Zhao Yunlan’s end. Clearly in a hurry, he interrupted. “Okay, okay, sounds great. Buy it. Tell them it’s a rush order.”

Guo Changcheng made an affirmative sound and was about to click *Buy* when his eyes fell on the shop name. It was a sex toy store.

The pure little nerd turned crimson, stammering into the phone. “D-Director Zhao… This… This is a little…”

“Don’t worry if it’s a little expensive,” Zhao Yunlan said. “Just remember to get a receipt. Okay, I can’t talk anymore. Gotta go. Don’t waste time!”

He hung up, leaving no room for argument.

Guo Changcheng stared at the screen and turned to stone.

Chapter 18

WHEN A LIFE-SIZED blowup doll was delivered to 4 Bright Avenue, the courier hadn't even gotten out of earshot before Zhao Yunlan roared in fury.

"Guo Changcheng, is that a head or a chamber pot on your neck?!"

Daqing gave the large doll a curious swat, eliciting an indecent moan from it. The cat's fur stood on end. Zhao Yunlan's face turned so blue it was nearly black. He could only point a trembling finger at the doll, too enraged to speak for a solid half minute.

Guo Changcheng curled up into his best imitation of a mushroom. He stood blankly in a corner, not even blinking.

Zhao Yunlan finally swallowed the anger that was stuck in his chest. His throat hurt from choking on it. After a while, to Zhu Hong, he finally managed a weak, "Can you…clothes some find for it…"

Hearing what had just come out of his own mouth, he was overcome with fresh anger. He slammed the door shut, hand on his chest.

Zhu Hong turned to Guo Changcheng. "Congratulations! You've infuriated the public nuisance so badly that he's lost the power of speech."

Lin Jing patted him on the shoulder. "Xiao-Guo, I've just noticed what a warrior you are!"

Guo Changcheng was on the verge of tears.

Chu Shuzhi silently picked Daqing up and covered his eyes. Wearing his usual bitter expression, he turned away to avoid the whole offensive mess.

Zhu Hong dug up a huge military bag from somewhere and stuffed the doll inside. To the air, she said, "I'm sorry. You'll have to stay inside Clarity a little longer, but you can come in once we're off the plane."

A wisp of white smoke emerged from Zhao Yunlan's watch. It circled Zhu Hong once and stopped in front of her, becoming the blurry silhouette of a girl. Zhao Yunlan had too much yang energy. Even with Clarity's protection, it was uncomfortable for a ghost to spend so much time around him. Wang Zheng looked far weaker than before.

"I'll think of it as being airsick," Wang Zheng said, breath thin as gossamer. Then she finally got a look at her prospective body. Her misty eyes betrayed her utter speechlessness.

At this point, Guo Changcheng was too afraid to even lift his head.

When they set out, no one had the nerve to bother Director Zhao—not even Daqing, who turned into a finger-sized kitty phone charm and hung obediently on Zhu Hong's phone. Their boss, meanwhile, looked like he was heading to the airport to hijack a plane.

That lasted until they ran into Shen Wei and his students at the gate.

Zhao Yunlan's expression had been as dark as the bottom of a pot. Right before everyone's eyes, it cleared up in an instant. His icy gaze thawed, and the black aura that had been swirling around him moments before vanished as if it had never existed. Without a moment's hesitation, he abandoned his colleagues and strolled toward the man at the center of a group of students. "What a coincidence!"

As coincidences went, this one was almost unbelievable. Shen Wei's eyes flashed. It was the very opposite of a pleasant surprise. He nodded at Zhao Yunlan as if not in control of his own body. "Officer Zhao."

Lin Jing recognized Shen Wei. Confused, he said, "Isn't that Shen-laoshi? The guy who was trapped in the hospital with xiao-Guo that time? Didn't the boss wipe his memories?"

"Not completely." Zhu Hong snorted softly. "I don't think the public nuisance has good intentions."

"Hmm." Chu Shuzhi studied Shen Wei's face from afar. "I think his intentions all have to do with lust."

Zhao Yunlan placed himself in a very particular spot near Shen Wei—not quite intimately close, but nearer than normal socializing distance, leaving Shen Wei unable to either avoid him or get closer. Dropped in the midst of a group who had stepped outside their ivory tower, Zhao Yunlan and his silver tongue quickly won the trust of the naive students. After only a minute or two of chatting, he'd learned their exact destination and the subject of their field research.

"You guys are going to Qingxi Village too?" Zhao Yunlan gave Shen Wei a meaningful look. "This really is an unbelievable coincidence! It's written in the stars!"

The reference to fate set Shen Wei's nerves jangling. His fingers curled tightly against his knees.

Zhao Yunlan put on a show of being worried. "The plane can only land in the nearby city. The drive from there to Qingxi Village is at least a dozen hours, all on winding mountainous roads. How are you guys planning on getting there?"

Shen Wei immediately saw what Zhao Yunlan was angling for, but unfortunately, none of his travel companions caught on. Before Shen Wei could open his mouth, the class leader, a young woman in red, responded. "By bus!"

"I know just the one you mean," Zhao Yunlan said. "It only goes once a day, and it leaves at six in the morning, right? It doesn't stop at Qingxi Village."

The class leader said, "Yes, I checked the map. I think you can get off midway through the route and walk the rest of the way. It doesn't seem far."

"In some respects it's not, but for you city kids it'll probably take four or five hours." Zhao Yunlan watched Shen Wei from the corner of his eye, keeping his cool. "In this country, there are prairies to the east and mountains to the west. Those mountainous regions are nothing like Dragon City. It doesn't look far on a map, but you might need to cross several mountains with no roads or paths. And four or five hours is assuming you don't get lost. Think about it. By the time you get off the bus, it'll be evening. At that point, with a five-hour walk ahead of you, you'll probably have to camp out. Given the season, it's colder than you can imagine out there. Do you guys want to sleep in the snow?"

As expected, this turned the startled students into a flock of panicked chicks.

Zhao Yunlan gauged that they were adequately frightened. “See, it really is fate that we bumped into each other. You should come with us. I have some friends out there, so I’ll ask them to have a few cars ready. Since we’re all going to the same place, we might as well travel together. That way we can take care of each other. What do you guys think?”

The class leader hesitated. “That… Isn’t that too much trouble for you?”

Zhao Yunlan waved dismissively. He slung an arm around Shen Wei’s shoulder and winked at her. “Not at all. Do you know what kind of relationship we have?”

“Don’t mess—” Shen Wei began.

“Neighbors!” Zhao Yunlan smirked, not letting him go. “Remember this, students. In the future, when you go out into the world, you can’t count on distant relatives the way you can count on close neighbors. If you get along, neighbors can be closer than family. Right, Shen-laoshi?”

Shen Wei had nothing to say in response.

“Oh, right!” Zhao Yunlan said solicitously, straightening up. “I’ll bet you haven’t eaten yet. Hold on.”

He left and soon returned, carrying a few bags of fast food. As he passed by, he casually shoved two at Guo Changcheng.

Chu Shuzhi whistled at him. “That’s unusual. I thought he’d forgotten we exist.”

Lin Jing chanted a ritual apology to a piece of fried chicken. “Amitabha, apologies for my transgression.” Formalities observed, this sad excuse for a monk—a man who both drank alcohol and ate meat—eagerly stuffed the chicken leg into his mouth and reached for a bottle of Coke.

Guo Changcheng’s armload of food was gone in the blink of an eye. He was at a loss, when someone handed him a burger. Turning, he realized it was Zhu Hong, but she wasn’t looking at him. Instead, she was staring in Zhao Yunlan’s direction. Whatever Zhao Yunlan was saying made the entire group of students laugh. Some people were naturally the center of everyone’s attention, no matter where they were.

“Thank—” Guo Changcheng began.

“You’re welcome,” Zhu Hong said before he could finish. In a tiny voice, she asked, “That guy named Shen—who is he?”

Guo Changcheng followed her gaze. “He’s a professor at Dragon City University. He was a big help during the last case. Before Director Zhao got there, we dealt with the Hunger Ghost together, but Director Zhao said he wouldn’t remember that.”

Zhu Hong’s delicate eyes narrowed. “He’s already a professor?” she muttered. “He looks so young. Aren’t professors usually older? Is he married, then?”

Guo Changcheng scratched his head in confusion. “How would I know?”

Zhu Hong spared him a quick side-eye before looking back at Zhao Yunlan. Shen Wei had just taken a chicken nugget, and Zhao Yunlan was already holding the dipping sauce in easy reach. Even from this distance, she could see the softness in his gaze. He could have been an entirely different person from the grouchy comrade who’d spent all morning yelling.

“He must not have a family yet,” Zhu Hong said quietly after observing for a while. “The public nuisance is beyond shameless, but he wouldn’t start something with someone who’s spoken for. Ugh, my fucking eyes.”

Zhao Yunlan’s phone rang again, as if it were a hotline. Holding his drink in one hand and his phone in the other, he leaned down at lightning speed and stole a fry right out of Shen Wei’s hand with his mouth. He ate it in two bites and licked his lips, eyes locked on Shen Wei, whose fingers made a hasty retreat.

The SID’s boss abandoned them for three and a half hours. Once on the plane, Zhao Yunlan switched his seat, claiming he wanted to hear Shen-laoshi speak to his students about the customs in Qingxi Village.

Eventually they landed in the airport nearest the village. As they approached the exit, a fat middle-aged man bundled in a fur coat came into view. The man, holding a sign that said “Director Zhao,” was craning his neck in all directions. Zhao Yunlan strode over to him, both groups in tow.

The man’s hesitant expression cleared when it became obvious that Zhao Yunlan was headed his way. Correctly guessing who Zhao Yunlan was, he offered a warm welcome. “Director Zhao! You must be Director Zhao, right? I can tell by your energy that you’re not just anyone! No wonder you’re a leader at your tender age.”

“Leader? Me?” Zhao Yunlan took a step forward and shook the man’s hand in both of his own. “It’s so cold here! The only thing that kept me from being anxious the whole trip was knowing you’d be here to meet us.”

The man, whose name was Lang-ge, gave him a forceful handshake. “When Xie-laoge called and told me to arrange a few cars for him, of course I agreed! Xie-ge and I are sworn brothers—his friends are my friends. How does that saying go? If friends are coming from afar, I must welcome them myself!”

“You and Xie Si-ge are that close?” Zhao Yunlan feigned astonishment, eyes wide. He pointed at Lang-ge, face serious. “Us, friends? We’re brothers! Xie Si-ge’s brother is my brother too! Don’t treat me like a stranger or I’ll be angry.”

Lang-ge laughed, immediately accepting the offering. “Ha ha! I wouldn’t dream of it. From now on I’ll tell everyone I have a bro who’s an official in Dragon City! What a feather in my cap! Come on, let’s get you all settled, and then we’ll have a welcome dinner. Don’t be polite with me, now. Being polite to your laoge shows disrespect!”

The two of them carried on like that extensively, acting out the roles of love at first sight in front of everyone without even a blush. Just like that, strangers became brothers. Shen Wei and his students looked at each other before following along despite their confusion. Lang-ge feted them all with a true feast, then arranged for them to stay in the area’s only five-star hotel.

Before sunrise the next morning, three SUVs were ready and waiting outside the hotel. A look in the trunks revealed thick coats, camping gear, calorie-dense food, medicine, the works, all of it brand new. Everything had been thought of. It was almost enough to sponsor a professional research team.

Zhao Yunlan took it in stride, as if it weren’t far too great a gift. He had Lin Jing give each driver a carton of Chunghwa cigarettes, then launched into another round of affectionate bullshit with Lang-ge, who’d come to see them off. Lang-ge

was overflowing with enthusiasm; the only indication that Zhao Yunlan had knocked him out with fourteen shots of baijiu[31] the night before was the fact that his face was swollen like a pig's.

After bidding Lang-ge a reluctant farewell, Zhao Yunlan quietly spoke to Shen Wei. "Driving on winding mountain roads is tricky. Why don't you all come along with us? Lin Jing, Zhu Hong, and I will handle the driving. We can divide the students between us and regroup at Qingxi Village. What do you say?"

It was more than even a paid tour guide would offer. Declining outright would have made Shen Wei seem ungrateful. But one couldn't just accept a favor for no reason, and Shen Wei didn't have Zhao Yunlan's shamelessness. He seemed incredibly apologetic even after he was in the vehicle. "This is all because I didn't plan well enough. We're causing you so much trouble. What's more, I don't even know Mr. Lang, yet he spent so much money. Once we're back, do you think we should mail him some gifts?"

Zhao Yunlan gave an arrogant wave. "It's all good. Don't you worry about a thing. No one offers help for no reason; it's all on my tab. Besides, there's absolutely no need for *you* to be polite with me."

Shen Wei had no reply. They happened to be at a red light, so Zhao Yunlan braked and turned to beam at him, dimples out in full force. Color suffused Shen Wei's face. He took a quick look at the students in the back and seemed to exhale in relief when he saw them both excitedly looking out the window.

It occurred to Zhao Yunlan that he could try making another move. He reached over to gently smooth out a caught corner of Shen Wei's collar. When his curled finger grazed the tender skin just below Shen Wei's earlobe, it could have been unintentional.

"Just fixing your collar," he said, straightening back up and adjusting the rearview mirror.

This time, Shen Wei's blush reached his ears.

The light changed and Zhao Yunlan stepped on the gas. He focused entirely on the road ahead, but the corners of his mouth quirked up.

Shen Wei focused his attention out the window. He seemed embarrassed, but what Zhao Yunlan didn't see, with Shen Wei's back to him, was how his blush faded and he turned pale. His brows seemed constantly furrowed, as if the deep crease between them might become permanent. An indescribably cold harshness marred that gentle, scholarly face and gave him a lonely, distant air.

Driving up the winding mountain roads was strenuous. The ride was jolting and nauseating, and after six or seven hours, the two students in the back were slumped over, sound asleep. The farther they went, the narrower and more twisted the roads got. The edge of the cliff was less than a meter from the tires, without even a railing between them and the long, long fall to the bottom. Fortunately, the cars Lang-ge had provided were as good as they looked, and Zhao Yunlan, despite his unreliable act, was a steady driver. The ride had some tense moments but no danger.

As they got deeper into the mountains, the temperature dropped more and more. Heavy snow began accumulating along the roadside, and there was less and less sign of human life.

The three vehicles had stuck close together since leaving, but the distance between them had been increasing even as they drove more slowly. When Zhao Yunlan carefully downshifted and came to a stop, the two cars following in his wake did the same.

"The road's getting a little iffy," said Zhao Yunlan, opening the door. "I think we need to put on the snow chains." To Shen Wei, he said, "It's cold out here. Stay put."

Shen Wei ignored him and jumped down to help. The wind in the deep mountains was harsh as a steel whip, strong enough to knock a man over. The cold was bad, but the truly frightening prospect was snowstorms. The wind was enough to cut through even an extra-thick down coat and chill you to the core, never mind the fitted jacket Zhao Yunlan was wearing only because it flattered him.

Awake now, the two students considerately offered to help, but Zhao Yunlan locked them inside. "Stay where you are and don't add to the chaos. Catching a cold in a place like this is no joke."

Between them, Shen Wei and Zhao Yunlan quickly got the chains onto the tires, but their fingers were frozen stiff by the time they finished. Zhao Yunlan straightened up and looked into the distance. The snowy mountains seemed endless, neighboring a huge glacier. The thin clouds and the mountains overlapped in an eternal expanse of earth and sky.

He called the other drivers and reminded them of what to watch out for when driving in the current conditions, then emphasized, "We're entering glacier territory. Keep quiet and do *not* honk. If there's an avalanche, there'll be nothing left of the SID but the night shift."

There was snow everywhere. The sun was starting to dip in the west, and the sky's crispness was blurring softly. As the light faded, and there were fewer and fewer tire tracks on the ground, and the bleak, desolate cold gradually intensified. Even as they drew closer to the distant glacier, it became harder to make out. There was a final flash of reflected cold light from its tip, and then even that was gone.

Zhao Yunlan turned on the headlights. Shen Wei, afraid of distracting him, didn't make a sound. The vehicle slowed to a crawl. Outside were thousands of meters of cliff face, sheer white in every direction, except for the occasional mottled grayish brown of mountain rock.

The white snow covering the dark mountain provided the last light in the southern sky. Once it faded, full dark descended.

The two students in the back were the red-clad class leader and a boy in small-framed glasses. Both were afraid to even breathe too heavily. Little Glasses quietly asked Shen Wei, "Laoshi, will we get out of the mountains today? Will we be able to find somewhere to sleep?"

Before Shen Wei could answer, Zhao Yunlan replied, "Don't worry. Qingxi Village's border is on the snowy mountain. After this stretch we should be almost there, but…"

A sudden tiny light blinded him before he finished the thought. Zhao Yunlan downshifted at once, then carefully braked to a stop.

"What is it?" the class leader asked nervously.

Shen Wei gave her a wave. “It’s all right. There’s some sort of light up ahead. You two stay here, and I’ll go take a look.”

“You saw it too?” Zhao Yunlan asked. They exchanged solemn glances.

The girl was sensitive enough to realize that something about the atmosphere felt wrong. “Is… Is it a streetlight?”

“No streetlights on this road.” Zhao Yunlan turned around. “You two, don’t leave the car. There’s chocolate and beef jerky in the back. If you’re hungry, just grab some.”

Having said that, he pushed the door open and got out, with Shen Wei close behind.

The wind had stopped at some point, but the cold and gloom had only deepened. It wasn’t the bitter cold of ice and snow but the wet sort that crept into the bones and lingered, radiating chill from the inside out. There was deep silence all around. Even that light a short way off was cold, flickering as if someone was holding a lantern.

It somehow evoked the image of white paper lanterns used in funeral processions in olden times. In the short time it had taken to get out of the car, the light seemed like it’d gotten even closer.

The sound of the wind and falling snow had completely stopped. They instinctively stepped lightly.

Zhao Yunlan’s eyes suddenly widened. He opened the car door and shoved Shen Wei inside, then waved to the people who’d gotten out of the other vehicles to see what was going on, signaling them to get back in and stay there. Diving back inside, he engaged the locks.

In that small span of time, the light had drawn close enough that a person’s silhouette was visible.

Zhao Yunlan gave the students urgent instructions. “No matter what you see, keep your mouth shut, don’t press your face against the window, and don’t make a sound.”

The windows had fogged up in the cold. Only the windshield was clear enough to easily see what was approaching: someone carrying a lantern, leading a large group toward the stopped cars. There were men and women among them, but they were outnumbered by children and the elderly. The people’s clothing seemed to be in rags, as if they were fleeing a great famine.

How was it possible that so many people were walking along a mountain road intended for cars?

“Who are those people?” the class leader asked. Her trembling voice was very small.

“Those aren’t people,” Zhao Yunlan murmured. “It’s a ghost army passing through.”

The girl clapped a hand over her mouth. At this range, the people’s dull-eyed faces were visible. Every one of them was covered in terrible wounds. Strangest of all was the “person” in the lead, holding the paper lantern. They wore a very tall hat that reached all the way down to their chin. If they had a face, it couldn’t be seen; there was only a deathly pale tip of chin peeking out. Their entire body was snowy white,

as if made from papier-mâché, and as stiff as a kite being carried closer on the breeze.

The paper person wasn't looking at the road but somehow managed to avoid the vehicle completely. In fact, as they passed by, everyone in the car saw them pause through the fogged window. They bowed to the car twice. Zhao Yunlan gave a slight nod of acknowledgment, returning the greeting. The paper person continued to float forward, followed by the crowd. They headed down the mountain road.

It wasn't until the whole procession had receded into the distance that Zhao Yunlan got back out. Grabbing a flashlight from the trunk, he told Shen Wei, "Something might've happened up ahead. I need to take a look. You take care of these kids."

Shen Wei's brow creased. Zhao Yunlan grabbed his hand and was shocked by how cold it was. That one touch gave him the feeling that Shen Wei was desperately drinking in his body heat. His heart ached faintly in response.

"Don't frown," Zhao Yunlan said. "It'll be okay."

Chapter 19

THE FIERCE WIND became even more aggressive. It whipped the snow high off the ground, lashing people's faces. The sky and ground changed colors. The glow of Zhao Yunlan's flashlight was no brighter than a firefly, and he quickly vanished from sight in the blustering snow.

Twenty minutes later, when he still hadn't returned, Shen Wei could wait no longer.

"Stay put and do not get out of the car," Shen Wei told the students. "Hand me a flashlight, and I'll go check on him. I'll be right back."

"Laoshi?" The class leader stopped him, clearly worried. "Could something have happened?"

Shen Wei paused. Between the dim light and his thin glasses, his face revealed nothing. "No. What could possibly happen to him under my watch?"

Bundling himself up tightly in his coat, he pushed the car door open, got out, and set off in long strides.

A crow's hoarse caw sounded by his ear. Shen Wei took off his snow-covered glasses and looked up to see a bird standing there in the endless snow. It looked as much like a crow as it sounded, but it was much larger than an ordinary one. Its long, slender tail dragged behind it, and it stared directly at him with bloodred eyes. It showed no sign of fearing humans. Instead, its examination of Shen Wei seemed keenly interested.

Shen Wei took a few more steps with great difficulty. The large bird kept watching him, then tilted its head back and cawed suddenly. After that long cry, it silently lowered its head until its beak nearly touched the ground, as if it were mourning.

The wind-whipped snow blurred Shen Wei's vision. He felt as if he'd been frozen—not merely stiff but truly numb, as if the blood in his veins had stopped flowing and his nerve endings had iced over.

But miraculously, his frozen sense of smell picked up on something. It was unpleasant, but not overwhelmingly so. It was as if something foul were rotting under the deep white snow. He stopped suddenly, taking a closer look at a particular patch of snow. There was the slightest bulge beneath the surface. Something was moving, heading toward the mountaintop.

There was something underground!

For a second, Shen Wei nearly forgot himself. His hands instinctively clenched into fists as a terrible ruthlessness flooded the darkness of his eyes. The snowy ground began to boil under the weight of his gaze. The thing lurking below was on the verge of bursting to the surface…

But then a voice suddenly rang out behind him. "Didn't I tell you to wait in the car? Why are you out here?"

Shen Wei twitched. The murderous intent in his eyes evaporated, leaving him looking a little lost. Before he could turn, something was being wrapped around him. Maybe Zhao Yunlan was truly oblivious to the cold, or maybe he was gritting his

teeth and bearing it, but either way, he'd opened his own coat and drawn Shen Wei into it. The heat of his body was palpable, reaching Shen Wei through his thin knit sweater.

Zhao Yunlan's face was nearly blue with cold, but the smile blossoming there was warm, if a bit stiff with the chill. "Did you come to look for me?" he asked.

Don't respond to him! A desperate scream tore through Shen Wei's heart. *Don't respond!* But the fierce wind had sliced his reason to ribbons, thin as a cicada's wing. Against his will, as if bewitched, he nodded.

Zhao Yunlan started to chuckle quietly. With his arm around Shen Wei's shoulder, he drew Shen Wei into something like an embrace. They were suddenly so close that the tip of his nose nearly touched Shen Wei's face. When Zhao Yunlan exhaled, the warmth of it brushed Shen Wei's skin like a kiss.

Shen Wei held his breath. His heart beat like thunder. With the icy wind filling the air with snow, Zhao Yunlan might have been the only tangible thing in existence between the vast earth and sky.

"Let's get going." Zhao Yunlan backed off quickly, leaving the echo of a touch. His husky voice shattered the liminal atmosphere enveloping them, as if jolting them from a dream. Shen Wei followed silently.

They were close in height and tripping over each other's feet as they walked, so Zhao Yunlan clipped the little flashlight to his collar and held Shen Wei's hands.

Shen Wei struggled reflexively, but Zhao Yunlan just tightened his grip.

"Stop fidgeting," Zhao Yunlan said, right by his ear. "And watch your step. It's slippery."

The large bird standing at the roadside suddenly shot into the sky. It circled twice, then flew off into the distance.

Zhao Yunlan followed Shen Wei's gaze. "That's a Mourning Bird. The elderly say massive crows like that with those really long tail feathers are called Mourning Birds. They only appear before a huge disaster. They're inauspicious."

He didn't wait for Shen Wei to respond as his brows furrowed and his eyes flashed in a show of confusion. "Is your birth chart jinxed?" he asked. "How come you always run into things like these?"

"What happened?" Shen Wei, clearly not wanting to deal with his probing, changed the subject.

Zhao Yunlan didn't pursue it. "I took a look up ahead. We probably need to find somewhere to spend the night. I think there was an avalanche a little further on. The roads are blocked."

They'd reached the car. As he spoke, he tried to pull the door open, but his hands were too cold for him to apply any force. He tried twice, to no avail.

Shen Wei opened it for him. "Get inside and get warm."

Once in the car, the heat made Zhao Yunlan feel a little dizzy. He massaged his temples and accepted a piece of chocolate the class leader handed him. "This road is about seven or eight years old. It's a pretty niche road trip route, but there was a travel magazine feature on it. I remember that there are a few villages at the bottom of the mountain. Enough tourists visit that lots of villagers have turned their homes into inns, but we can't get through using the road ahead and I can't see anything

under the mountain. Even with binoculars, I could just barely make out some large trees under the snow. There were only a few branches sticking out."

Carefully, Little Glasses said, "Then the people who passed by—were they villagers who died in the avalanche? I've heard accounts from elderly folks of ghost army sightings during large earthquakes."

Zhao Yunlan shook his head, then took out his phone and dialed a number. After exchanging a few simple greetings, he started asking about the monitoring of local geological disasters.

"Okay. Okay, thank you. No worries, we should be fine for a night… Mm-hmm, I know what to do." He hung up. "Well, that's a bit of a problem."

"Was it really an avalanche?"

"It was just on the news," Zhao Yunlan said. "It's a catastrophic natural disaster—much worse than the earthquake. Apparently several villages down below have been buried. The emergency squad is trying to figure something out, but I don't think there's any hope."

The class leader asked, "Then where will we stay? In the car? Can we keep the heat on the whole night? What if we run out of gas?"

"We have enough gas, but it's not safe to stay here overnight right after an avalanche. We need to get to higher ground. Don't be afraid—just follow me. There's a little house at the top of the mountain. I'm not sure what it's for. But I took a look through the binoculars and saw that it at least has a roof, even if there isn't anyone there."

Feeling a little warmer now, Zhao Yunlan buttoned up his coat and got back out of the car. He opened the trunk and pulled out a huge bag of food and a few warm outdoor coats. He tossed them to the others. "Put the coats on and eat something. Whatever you can't eat, bring it with you. I'll tell the people behind us to come too. We'll set out and carry the sleeping bags and tents. Young lady, you can just carry the food. I'll carry your sleeping bag for you."

Once Zhao Yunlan had filled the others in, they quickly bundled up, packed, and hurried over. Shen Wei, who had always had an eye for details, noticed that there suddenly seemed to be an extra person among them.

The person was at the back of the group, not making a sound. The figure suggested a woman, but between the thick layers of clothing and the face being covered, it was hard to be sure. There was something profoundly strange about her. It might have been because she was badly chilled, but there was a bizarre lack of coordination in the way she moved.

Zhu Hong occasionally fell back and spoke to her, getting only a nod or a shake of the head in response. Shen Wei also noticed that if her head moved, her feet stopped. She would only resume walking slowly after shaking her head, as if only one body part could move at a time.

While he was mulling it over, an arm suddenly hooked around his shoulders. The back of a hand touched his face.

The gesture was far too intimate. Shen Wei couldn't allow it in front of everyone, but also couldn't flinch away from it. He stood stock-still. Fortunately, Zhao Yunlan quickly took his hand away. "How come you're so sensitive to the cold?"

Awkwardly, Shen Wei said, “I’m not cold.”

“What do you mean you’re not cold? Your lips are blue!” Zhao Yunlan interrupted. He took off the windbreaker he’d only just put on and wrapped it around Shen Wei, leaving no room for argument.

Shocked, Shen Wei grabbed his hand. “What are you doing? You said yourself that catching cold in a place like this is no joke!”

“I’m wearing a thermal undershirt.” Zhao Yunlan tugged his collar down. “Even if we were staying down there with the villagers, they wouldn’t have heating. I came prepared, unlike you guys. Hurry and put it on.”

When Shen Wei was still unwilling, Zhao Yunlan softened his voice. “Come on, don’t make me worry.”

Shen Wei had no defenses against that look and tone. In a flash, Zhao Yunlan had finished bundling him up in the coat and headed to the back of the group.

“Watch your step,” Zhao Yunlan called. “Hold on to each other. Xiao-Guo, get your Zhu Hong-jie’s luggage. Can’t you pay more attention to that kind of thing? What are your eyes for, breathing?”

With the memory of Director Zhao’s earlier fury in mind, Guo Changcheng shrank a little, wordlessly scampered to the back of the group, and took Zhu Hong’s bags.

Shen Wei’s eyes stayed on Zhao Yunlan’s back for a little while. His hand lingered over the fading trace of Zhao Yunlan’s body heat; he rubbed at it, unwilling to let go. Then he pulled up the zipper and pressed on the pendant hanging at his collarbone. It emitted a faint warmth that stood out clearly against the endless ice and snow.

It was so terribly faint, but it offered so much comfort.

The group walked for about half an hour before finally spotting the little house Zhao Yunlan had mentioned. But seeing it was only the first step—after all, one could have a destination in sight and still ride a horse to death before reaching it. Actually getting there took another half hour.

The house was made of stone, with a wooden frame on the outside. The roof was some sort of cow hide, making it windproof and able to withstand the weight of snow. A small garden surrounded the hut, and outside that was a worn old fence, almost buried in snow.

It looked old and run-down and lonely, jarring against the landscape on the mountaintop.

Just as Zhao Yunlan reached out to open the little wooden gate, Daqing, who had been hiding in Zhu Hong’s bag all this time, suddenly sprang out. Before anyone could even wonder where a cat had come from, he gave a sharp yowl, fur standing on end.

Zhao Yunlan grabbed hold of him. “What is it?”

Daqing’s eyes were locked on to the snowed-in garden. Behind them, a voice spoke up—Wang Zheng’s voice, almost sighing. “Director Zhao, Daqing wants you to know that there’s something buried in this yard.”

If Wang Zheng had still been alive, her voice would have been considered pleasant. But she was a ghost, and her voice, like the rest of her, was well past its expiry date. Her distinctive floaty tone could make anyone who heard it break out in goosebumps.

In this case, the suddenness with which she spoke scared everyone into silence.

Zhao Yunlan rubbed his hands together, warming them a bit. “Everyone wait here a minute. I’ll go take a look.”

He pushed the gate open, confident that his skills would protect him. When he entered, Shen Wei was right behind him.

The frozen ground was very uneven for some reason. Zhao Yunlan slowed his footsteps and circled the yard once. The black cat’s eyes glowed like two small lanterns, a faint red illumination in the dark. Suddenly he freed himself from Zhao Yunlan’s arms, raced to a corner of the garden, and started digging at a small bulge in the ground with his fat paws.

Zhao Yunlan quickly knelt beside him, grabbed him by the collar, and hefted him up. With no care for his jacket, he wiped Daqing’s claws on his sleeve. Then he shined his flashlight on the spot where Daqing had been digging.

At first, he only saw a glimpse of something ivory colored. He pulled out a little shovel he’d hidden in his boot and dug around roughly, exploring deeper…until a flattish forehead and half of an empty eye socket came into view. He’d dug up half a skull.

Shen Wei, having followed them in, surveyed the small garden. He took in all the bumps in the ground and had a sudden chilling thought: they were probably standing on countless human bones, just beneath the surface.

He turned back to look at the shivering students at the gate, then bent down and touched Zhao Yunlan’s arm. “Bury it for now,” he said quietly. “Don’t make a big deal of it.”

Zhao Yunlan covered the skull back up with the frozen dirt, then stood as if nothing had happened. He waved for the students and his subordinates to come in.

“It’s okay. There’re just some broken shingles buried all over the yard. Walk carefully and don’t twist an ankle. The ground’s uneven. Put up the tents once you’re inside and make sure to stay warm.” He tucked his little shovel away and lit a cigarette, shivering. Standing to the side, he waited for everyone to get in first.

Wang Zheng hung back as the others entered. She stopped in front of Zhao Yunlan and whispered, “You saw it?”

“…Mm-hmm.”

“It’s more than one layer deep,” she said.

Zhao Yunlan’s blood went cold. “I’ve never seen someone add a top bunk to a huge communal bed. It’s way too cramped here. If we squish in with them, will they complain to property management?

“It’s true that there are certain taboos here.” Wang Zheng paused. “I’ll go and tell them. As long as we carry out the correct rituals, it shouldn’t be a problem if we stay here for a night.”

Zhao Yunlan nodded. “Hurry,” he urged.

Wang Zheng counted her steps to the door, backed up slightly, turned, and slowly knelt. Raising her hands above her head, she prostrated herself in worship in the direction of the garden, performing the ceremonial gestures with great formality.

The curious students hovered by the door. Shen Wei shushed them one by one, then pushed them inside before they could see what he had just seen. The tip of Wang Zheng's now-visible finger had the distinct look of plastic, and the short lock of hair peeking out from under her huge hood was clearly fake nylon hair!

Zhao Yunlan stood against the wall of the house and watched Wang Zheng.

She knelt by the door, speaking the language of an unknown ethnic group in a low voice. No one understood her, but there was a feeling—a feeling of notes flowing from her mouth like water. They resonated in the garden, as though awakening an ancient soul. The sound stirred something in the depths of the heart.

Everyone in the little house, including Shen Wei's students, felt it. The youths all lowered their heads involuntarily, solemn and respectful. Only Zhao Yunlan, cigarette between his lips, seemed completely unmoved.

"What… What was that?" Zhu Hong couldn't help asking quietly.

"The souls of my dead ancestors." Wang Zheng stood up, stiffly brushing dirt from her pants. "I've greeted them, so it should be fine now. Let's not all squeeze in the doorway. Come sit inside. Remember not to throw garbage into the garden and always offer a greeting before going outside. If you need to relieve yourself, stay away from the garden."

Somehow, hearing her say that was reassuring. Everyone bowed toward the garden and went indoors to get away from the wind.

Wang Zheng waited until everyone else was inside before speaking to Zhao Yunlan, voice low. "Director Zhao, you were born with the ability to see into a different world. You have always associated yourself with things that other people don't believe in. You have always acknowledged the existence of ghosts and gods. And yet, when passing by shrines or temples, you've never shown an ounce of respect. That's not right."

Zhao Yunlan carelessly flicked cigarette ash onto the window frame. With a smile, he nodded. "You're absolutely right. My behavior is intolerable. No one should follow my example. Even the constitution recognizes the freedom of religion, and one should always maintain a certain level of respect for other people's beliefs."

Even coming from fake plastic eyes, Wang Zheng's gaze was piercing. Her voice dropped almost to a whisper. "Within the Three Realms and Six Directions,[32] there will always be people and things you don't understand. Yes, you may be capable, but can any living human, no matter how great their abilities, be more powerful than the Heavens and Earth? Can a human be more powerful than fate?

"A person can't live too arrogantly, Director Zhao. If someone is too arrogant to even respect all the gods and buddhas, they may suffer the consequences one day."

Zhao Yunlan's smile dimmed slightly. He reached out and adjusted Wang Zheng's hood and clothes where they'd slipped out of place. The gesture was careful and gentle, but his words were cold. "My conscience is clear and I have nothing to ask for. Gods or buddhas, demons or monsters—who dares judge me? They're so lofty and great, but what does that have to do with me?"

Wang Zheng gave him a deep look, then sighed. She stretched out a plastic hand and tapped the air a few times, chanted something unintelligible, and then gently tapped Zhao Yunlan's forehead.

"You're a good person," she said in her ethereal voice. "The gods are benevolent. May they forgive you and protect you."

Zhao Yunlan didn't avoid her touch. He even lowered his head so she could reach his forehead more easily. Once she'd finished, he said, "You were a good person when you were alive too. Did the gods forgive and protect you?"

There was a trace of sadness in the plastic eyes as Wang Zheng looked up at him.

He nudged her shoulder. "The wind is brutal out here, sweet girl, so hurry inside."

Inside, Zhu Hong and Chu Shuzhi worked smoothly and efficiently together. In no time at all, they'd set up a small outdoor ethanol burner. They filled a little pot, around twenty centimeters wide, with clean snow. Zhu Hong had also set up a rack and put the vacuum-sealed beef jerky on it to be heated by the steam. Once the meat had softened a little, she skewered it and roasted it on the fire.

A few students had already taken out their notebooks. As soon as they saw Wang Zheng come in, their eyes lit up. They quickly surrounded her, and a boy who looked like a stick of bamboo spoke up, a little nervous. "Jiejie, would you mind if we asked about the customs of this little mountain house?"

As soon as he'd asked, he couldn't help looking at Shen Wei and noticing a slight crease in his brow. Apprehensive now, the student added, "Sorry, I mean—only if it's convenient for you. If there's any sort of taboo, never mind. Please don't be angry. We didn't know."

Wang Zheng sat down next to the little stove. Quietly, she said, "It's okay."

Keeping her hands inside her wide sleeves, she picked up a piece of chocolate from the pile beside her. It was unclear who had bought them, but the tiny chocolate balls were individually wrapped and rather exquisite. It seemed as if Wang Zheng really wanted to try one, but with her hands in her sleeves, despite passing it between them several times, she couldn't open the packaging.

The red-clad class leader picked up another one and passed it to her. "This one's good, jiejie. Eat this one."

"I'm just looking," Wang Zheng said softly. "I can't eat…candy."

She kept speaking. "There were several geological changes here, so the people living at the foot of this mountain went through many, many years of migration and integration. At the very beginning, a group of Khampas[33] settled here. Sky burials are popular among Tibetans. When someone dies, their corpse is given to the Sky Burial Master to be dismembered. Larger bones are smashed to bits and then mixed with yak butter and barley flour, making them easy for birds to eat. That ensures nothing is left behind. If any of the body remains, it's a bad omen, so the role of the Sky Burial Master was very important. This place we're staying in was originally where the Sky Burial Master lived."

The class leader shivered.

Wang Zheng didn't notice. "Even though Sky Burial Masters were highly respected, their regular contact with the dead meant that they were also inauspicious. Despite their high prestige, other people ordinarily preferred to avoid contact with them."

Hearing that made Guo Changcheng think of someone else: the Soul-Executing Emissary. Wasn't he also respected but feared by everyone? Other than Zhao Yunlan, no one dared speak an unnecessary word to him. Even ghosts avoided him, as if he would bring some sort of fearsome bad luck.

"Over the next centuries, many other ethnic groups came. Most were herdsmen, but some were farmers. Several large conflicts erupted between the different groups. They would have a truce, then fight; fight, then have a truce again. After fighting, they would make off with people from the other tribes. After a truce, they would intermarry. Their bloodlines slowly began to mix. Other ethnic groups also began to practice Sky Burial, just slightly differently from the Tibetan way."

Wang Zheng was like a history teacher. She spoke simply and straightforwardly, conveying information in a gentle voice that made it easy for listeners to nod off. Shen Wei's students had an advantage here—after all, this was their field of study. They were all eagerly taking notes.

Zhao Yunlan, on the other hand, dragged his sleeping bag next to Shen Wei's after eating a few pieces of beef jerky. Having claimed the best possible spot, he crawled into the sleeping bag and closed his eyes to rest.

"As time went on, the climate in the region grew worse and worse." Wang Zheng added a little water to the pot. "Fewer and fewer people remained. Most of them gradually migrated to other regions. Later, around… Hmm, I can't really remember when. I think maybe it was around the Song or Yuan Dynasties that a huge disaster occurred here. After that, the culture of multiple ethnicities cohabitating practically ceased to exist. Other than a small group of Hanga who hid in a cave, everyone either died or fled and never returned."

The class leader asked, "Is there any historical record of this?"

Wang Zheng shook her head. "Back then, this area wasn't part of the Central Plains and hadn't mixed with Han culture. What's more, the area was remote and the population was never large. News can't make its way in or out. If you checked the history books, at most you might find a note about the local geology or astronomy. The government at the time didn't even know there were people here. According to local legends passed down orally, that year the snow from the mountain transformed into fanged, clawed monsters. White monsters reached up from cracks in the ground and water sources. They grabbed people and livestock, tore their bellies open, and ripped off their heads."

The class leader thought about it and nodded. It was unclear if she understood or not. "Sounds like an avalanche caused by an earthquake, followed by a series of natural disasters."

Wang Zheng didn't nod or shake her head. "Later, the Hanga people decided to hide themselves and live deep within the mountains, not far from where Qingxi Village is today. The ancient Sky Burial site fell into disuse after the Tibetans moved away, but after that great disaster, the Sky Burial Master's little house became the place where the Hanga guarded the mountain. They believed one could see an impending disaster from high up, so every month, they would send a strong young

man to come keep watch over the mountain. Gradually, the custom changed, and the person who kept watch over the mountain became the most respected person in the tribe. The Mountain Keeper's hut became his home, and in turn, the hut became a very sacred place to the Hanga. At some point, if there was a major sacrificial ritual, the tribe would climb the mountain together and come to the hut to participate."

Little Glasses asked, "How come I've never heard of the Hanga tribe before?"

"The tribe was always very small, and no one ever married outside. It ceased to exist long ago, leaving no records behind."

The students all understood at once. The boy like a stick of bamboo concluded, "Oh, I get it. There weren't many people and they didn't marry outside the tribe, so hundreds of years of inbreeding caused their extinction."

Wang Zheng just chuckled quietly. The class leader, sitting nearest to her, shivered.

Once their curiosity was satisfied, Shen Wei urged all of the students to bed. The only people still up were Wang Zheng, who didn't need to sleep, and Daqing, who had stayed hidden during the day and was now coming out to stand guard during the night.

Shen Wei was the last one to lie down. He checked the windows and door, then took out a roll of tape from somewhere and carefully covered all the gaps. He quietly reminded the students one by one to stay warm at night, then asked Wang Zheng if she needed another layer of clothing. He even lowered the flame to keep the water in the pot from boiling over. Having taken care of everything, he got settled in his own sleeping bag.

During the history lecture, Zhao Yunlan had automatically blocked out the boring audio feed and gone to sleep, earbuds crammed into his ears. Now he was curled in a ball, head at a slight angle. One earbud had come a bit loose and was dangling from his ear.

Zhao Yunlan's features were beautifully pronounced. He was vibrant when his eyes were open, but he was still pretty when they were closed. Only now, he was pale from the cold, looking faintly worse for wear.

Shen Wei's gaze drifted to his face. Zhao Yunlan slept calmly and peacefully, as though he'd still be able to find a corner to sleep in even if the sky fell.

For some time, Shen Wei couldn't look away. He watched Zhao Yunlan quietly for a while, expression softening. He carefully removed Zhao Yunlan's earbuds, rolled them up, and set them aside. Then he took the coat Zhao Yunlan had thrown aside and spread it over him.

Guo Changcheng and one student had already started snoring mildly, as if in harmony. The soft sounds of puttering about came from where Wang Zheng was tidying up the little stove.

Shen Wei took a breath and lay on his side, his back turned to the group. Not long after that, his breathing slowed and steadied, as if he had fallen asleep.

But where no one else could see, his eyes were still open. In the faint light, his gaze stayed fixed on Zhao Yunlan, as if he were prepared to stare at Zhao Yunlan's sleeping countenance for the entire night.

Shen Wei had been restraining himself for too long. In the perfect silence, he couldn't help letting go for once. Lying there with Zhao Yunlan so tantalizingly near, his thoughts spun out of control. It was overwhelming. He imagined gathering that warm body close, pressing kisses to those eyes, that hair, those lips…tasting and partaking of every part.

He imagined possessing Zhao Yunlan utterly.

The fantasy alone was enough to make Shen Wei's breathing unsteady. He yearned with the desperate fervor of someone dreaming of hot soup as they froze to death.

But he didn't move a muscle. Just looking at Zhao Yunlan and thinking about him was seemingly enough.

Daqing curled up next to Wang Zheng, his tail sweeping back and forth. Once it had grown even later and he thought everyone was asleep, he asked quietly, "What exactly is buried in the garden? Corpses? Human heads? What kind of people are buried there?"

Wang Zheng's plastic face was hidden within her hood. "Heads. Decapitation was customary among the Hanga."

"How exactly did the tribe go extinct?"

Wang Zheng paused. "Didn't that student say it was inbreeding?"

"Don't try to fool me the same way you fooled those stupid kids. Even horses can avoid that problem, so eventually even you stupid humans would figure it out." Daqing sniffled impatiently. "Besides, one husband having multiple wives is widely accepted among many ethnic minorities. The so-called 'not marrying outside' just means that girls don't marry into other tribes and men can't have women from other tribes as their primary wife. How could it be that strict? And it's not as if a tribe is only two or three families—there would have to be *someone* more than five degrees removed. You can't all be close relations."

Wang Zheng looked down at him and stroked his head. "You're just a cat," she murmured. "You just need to eat your cat food and dried fish. Why are you thinking so much about human matters?"

She looked like a young woman and had the voice of one, but there was no trace of youthful vigor in the way she spoke. She sounded very old and very weary.

Daqing lay on the floor. Feline instinct made his eyes narrow in response to Wang Zheng's comforting touch, but he didn't close them completely. Instead he stared at a fixed spot and spaced out.

The night deepened.

Tranquility blanketed the little house on the mountaintop. Gradually, it emptied of all sound but soft, slow breathing and the chorus of snores.

Chapter 20

JUST PAST MIDNIGHT, with no warning, Zhao Yunlan snapped awake. Suddenly he was looking straight into Shen Wei's tender gaze, without even the barrier of glasses between them. Shen Wei looked away in a panic.

Fortunately, Zhao Yunlan didn't notice. He sat up silently, and after listening carefully for a moment, he pressed his index finger to his lips, signaling Shen Wei to keep quiet. Then he crawled out of his sleeping bag, picked up his flashlight, and headed outside. Daqing shot after him with a meow. Worried, Shen Wei got up too.

As soon as he stepped out, Zhao Yunlan realized there was no need for the flashlight. In the distance, the entire valley was ablaze as if fire had descended from Heaven. On one side was the frozen mountain, crusted in ice and snow; on the other side, everything was burning. Here on a mountaintop thousands of kilometers away, it was still as if they could hear pitiful screams from within the fire and feel the flames searing their skin. A whole expanse of sky was orange.

"What *is* that?" Zhao Yunlan said.

Daqing's fur was standing on end. It was as if they were no longer in the Mortal Realm at all. The valley's transformation into an inferno was a severe shock—enough to entrance anyone who saw it, distorting all sense of time and place.

As if in response, tremors spread through the entire garden. The frozen ground cracked open all over, exposing the buried skulls: large and small, new and old, in an array of pale shades. A series of clattering noises, like bone on bone, left the skulls all facing in the same direction, as if someone had arranged them.

More and more skulls surfaced, joining the others in their creepy, reverent stare in the direction of the fire.

Shen Wei had followed them outside. Zhao Yunlan pushed Shen Wei behind him, then grabbed Daqing. "Fatty, don't run around!"

"That's hellfire." At some point, Wang Zheng had come up behind them. Her hood had fallen down, revealing the blow-up doll's lifeless face. Before Shen Wei could take a closer look, she tumbled softly to the ground. Shen Wei made an instinctive attempt to catch her, but as soon as he touched the doll's body, it let out an exaggerated fake moan. That was enough of a shock to poor, gentlemanly Shen-laoshi that his hand shook, dropping the doll.

A girl in a white dress materialized from the plastic husk. Wang Zheng's familiar voice said, "'Sinners passing through hell's gates know that hellfire for them awaits.' I've heard that the fire from hell only burns those who have sinned."

Zhao Yunlan interrupted her angrily. "Keep that bullshit to yourself."

Wang Zheng pointed. "Look if you don't believe me."

Every single skull in the garden had turned around. In tidy formation, they peered toward the little wooden house. The sight of so many empty eye sockets was impossibly chilling. The skulls' mouths were open, jaws moving as if laughing. Suddenly the cat wasn't the only one whose hair stood on end. Only Wang Zheng showed no reaction to the unusually lively skulls. "My tribesmen. They want to skin me, pluck my tendons, and drink my blood."

Zhao Yunlan pulled a gun from his pocket and said evenly, “Wang Zheng, back in your body. Shen Wei, go back inside.”

Wang Zheng seemed dead set on mutiny today. She sighed as if she hadn’t heard him. “Except I’m already dead,” she said, bitterness seeping into her tone.

“Are you menopausal or something? Stop blabbering and get the fuck back inside!” Zhao Yunlan grabbed her translucent soul out of the air and stuffed her roughly back into the doll. Zhu Hong had been startled awake and came to check on things, and Zhao Yunlan snatched the doll from the ground and flung her into Zhu Hong’s arms.

Mouths suddenly wide, the skulls made a sudden rush for the door. Zhao Yunlan grabbed the door bolt, brought his arm up, and fired three shots. The skulls that had been shot let out human screams and dissolved into white smoke. Zhao Yunlan seized the chance to get the door closed.

One skull that had just hurled itself toward them got wedged between the door and the frame. Zhao Yunlan pulled a short knife from under his pant leg and brought the sheath violently down on the skull, which shattered like an eggshell. Zhao Yunlan slammed the door shut with a bang.

The skulls outside rose up one after another, bumping into the door in a relentless symphony of knocks. They jumped up high, nearly able to peer in through the cracks in the window. A few students jolted awake, but they stayed perfectly calm as they saw what was happening. How could such a scene be anything but a dream?

Even Guo Changcheng was calm. After all, this tiny mountain hut contained the all-powerful Director Zhao; a large, fierce talking cat; a fake monk who was capable of defeating the Hunger Ghost with just a small bottle; a snake yao who ate raw lamb slices; and Chu Shuzhi, whom Guo Changcheng was too afraid to speak to.

In the face of what looked like horrible danger, Guo Changcheng honestly thought it was quite safe. The poor kid had a lot of blind faith in his colleagues.

Chapter 21

"AMITABHA." Lin Jing rushed forward to help Zhao Yunlan hold the door closed. Staring at the jumping skulls outside the window, the fake monk panted, "I despair for this world where even skulls are pretending to be cute! What the hell is all this?"

Zhao Yunlan turned to Wang Zheng. "What the hell are those things coming after you? Okay, fine, they bite. But why do they bite *you*? Aren't they afraid of being poisoned from ingesting too much plastic?"

Lin Jing had the vague sense that Zhao Yunlan had let something slip. He gave his boss's shirt a subtle tug. The class leader overheard and snorted with laughter, then clapped a hand over her mouth at the other students' "now is not the time" expressions.

"In 1712, there was an uprising within the Hanga tribe." With Zhu Hong's help, Wang Zheng got to her feet, pulling her hood up tightly. "In the end, the rebels won. The man who had been chief died. His three wives, many children, and even the 112 brave warriors who followed him were all beheaded according to the old customs. Their bodies were burned, and their heads were buried in the Mountain Keeper's garden. They will be enslaved forever, bound to obey. They will never find peace."

Zhu Hong froze. "The ones in the garden?"

The knocking sounds grew more and more insistent. Zhao Yunlan exchanged a glance with Chu Shuzhi, who promptly unzipped his own windbreaker. The knit sweater he wore underneath was extremely peculiar. It had a seemingly endless number of pockets, making whoever wore it resemble a walking closet organizer. He felt through every pocket, as if counting money, until he found a stack of yellow paper talismans written in cinnabar.

Chu Shuzhi stuck a talisman on each corner of the door. As he applied each one, a faint white light shone around the yellow paper. Outside, things quieted down noticeably.

From there, he began slapping talismans onto the windows and walls by the handful, like someone plastering ads on a lamppost. In short order, the place was thickly covered in talismans on every surface.

The leaping skulls outside seemed to realize what they were up against. They all retreated a meter or two, now too afraid to bash into the wall or try to bite the windows.

Zhao Yunlan finally let go of the door. Despite the freezing temperature, he'd broken out into a sweat. He sat by the little stove thinking, then tore open a bag of milk powder, which he poured into a large bowl with some water and then put in the boiling pot. He looked at Wang Zheng, who had just gotten up, and ordered, "Boil it. Make sure everyone drinks a bowl, and after that, you need to explain to the group exactly what's going on."

"I'm sorry," was Wang Zheng's only answer. Her mouth might as well have been glued shut for all her willingness to reply; backed into a corner, she seemed more willing to give herself up than explain. "Just open the door and throw me out. If

I’m not in here, they won’t bother you, no matter what happens outside.”

“Excuse me?” Zhao Yunlan asked. “Do you really think I’m the sort of person who’d do something like that?”

Wang Zheng’s appearance might be terrifying, but she was a gentle ghost. She rarely spoke much, but she was always polite to everyone. Saying something so hurtful was very unusual for her. Feeling as though she’d lost her composure, she lowered her head and decided not to say anything else.

Chu Shuzhi cracked the window open and looked out, verifying that the skulls had all retreated from the charms inside the house. He gestured to Zhao Yunlan. “It’s three hours until daybreak. My talismans should last for at least five hours. Leave someone to stand watch, and everyone else can get some sleep.”

“I can stand wa—” Wang Zheng began.

Zhao Yunlan interrupted. “If something goes wrong, you won’t be able to deal with it. I’ll stand guard for the rest of the night.”

As he spoke, he pulled a windproof lighter from a pocket. “Girls, are you worried about secondhand smoke? If not, Mr. Police Officer here is gonna find a cigarette to hook up with to stay awake.”

The students had suffered a huge fright without ever fully waking up. Hearing that, they all settled back into their sleeping bags. Soon the hut was quiet again, other than the sound of the skulls rolling around in the snow outside. Everyone’s flashlights were turned off, leaving only the soft white light of the mess of talismans on the door and walls.

Daqing closed his eyes, tucked into Zhao Yunlan’s arms. Wang Zheng sat in a corner away from everyone else, lost in thought as she leaned against the wall. Zhao Yunlan took up a position next to the window. The tiny opening Chu Shuzhi had made was letting in a small draft. He stood in that spot, covering the tiny crack with his back, and lit a cigarette.

Shen Wei silently came over and handed him a thick jacket. Zhao Yunlan accepted, wrapping it around himself and his cat. As Shen Wei turned to leave, Zhao Yunlan spoke, too quietly for anyone else to hear. “Earlier, were you watching me?”

Shen Wei stopped in his tracks.

When he’d been startled awake, Zhao Yunlan had seen how Shen Wei was looking at him. It hadn’t been the look of someone who’d just woken up or someone lying awake because they couldn’t sleep. Shen Wei’s expression had been calm and content, something complex but gentle simmering in his gaze. Just seeing it made the heart clench. Zhao Yunlan had had the distinct feeling that those eyes had been focused on him, unblinking, for half the night.

If the situation was that Shen Wei was simply deeply closeted—feeling something for him but too afraid to take the first step—well, that was perfectly normal. Zhao Yunlan was rather attractive, if he said so himself. He was financially secure. He didn’t let his beastly temper show in front of just anyone, so he often gave the impression of having a great personality and being easy to talk to. With all that, he had always had good luck when it came to romance.

But whether it was animal attraction or Zhao Yunlan’s personal traits, or even love at first sight…would any of those really make someone lie awake all night long just to foolishly watch someone sleep? That had to be several lifetimes of

entanglement—a love with deep, deep roots.

"We knew each other before, didn't we?" Zhao Yunlan asked quietly. "You told me that you'd encountered me once during a case, but that wasn't all, was it?"

It was possible that this Shen-laoshi, with his excellent reputation and temperament, was actually a stalker who'd secretly been in love with Zhao Yunlan for a long time due to his good looks. But despite his limited self-awareness, Zhao Yunlan still figured that was basically impossible. In all honesty, it was more conceivable to imagine himself doing that than Shen Wei.

The alternative was that "Shen Wei" was just a disguise concealing someone who wasn't an ordinary human at all.

A disguise that could fool the entire SID.

Shen Wei was facing the other direction. His back was so still that he seemed to have become part of the night.

Zhao Yunlan's cigarette finally reached the end of its life. Distracted, he stubbed it out and rudely threw it out the window. It hit a jumping skull square in the forehead, and the white bone instantly turned black. The skull fell to the ground, twitched a few times, and stopped moving.

"After we get back, can we meet up to talk?" Zhao Yunlan asked.

Shen Wei said nothing for a long time. Just when Zhao Yunlan was resigning himself to not getting a response, a low voice came from the darkness. "All right."

Three or four hours passed very quickly. When the eastern sky was just starting to lighten, before the pale predawn glow had properly arrived, the ghostly things in the garden had already calmed down. The unidentified eerie blaze in the distance had also vanished without a trace. It might have all been just a dream.

Zhao Yunlan opened the door and personally went out into the garden to confirm that the sun was indeed rising and that dawn had arrived. Then he went back inside, rubbed his face tiredly, crossed his arms over his chest, and took a nap against the wall, finally at ease.

First he'd driven through the ice and snow for an entire day, and then his nerves had been stretched taut the whole night. So it might have been because he was too tired, but somehow Zhao Yunlan slept more deeply than he intended to. An hour or so later, Zhu Hong nudged him awake.

Zhao Yunlan realized there was a blanket draped over him now. If someone had thoughtfully tried to keep him warm, it was most likely Shen Wei. Zhao Yunlan began half-consciously looking around for him, eyes still fogged with sleep.

But before he could locate his target, Zhu Hong spoke. Her question landed like a blow, leaving him disoriented.

"Director Zhao, do you know where Wang Zheng went?"

"Wang Zheng?" Zhao Yunlan twitched and sat up, his head heavy. "I was asleep for less than an hour. Wasn't she just here?"

Zhu Hong had known Zhao Yunlan for many years. No matter how tired he got, most of the time he only allowed himself to rest his eyes or doze lightly. Falling so deeply asleep out in the middle of nowhere while standing guard against a host of menacing skulls was wildly out of character for him. Not sweating the small stuff was

one thing. Not having common sense was quite another.

Zhu Hong leaned in close and inhaled deeply. “What—” Zhao Yunlan began.

“Don’t move.” Zhu Hong took the blanket off him, holding it up by a corner. She took a close look through its fluff and then scraped up a trace of brown powder with her long nails. She looked up at Zhao Yunlan. “You’ve been tricked.”

He hunted fierce prey fearlessly, only to be bitten by his own hound!

And what’s more, it hadn’t been Shen Wei who left the blanket! Irrational fury washed over him.

“Get me a bottle of water,” he told Zhu Hong quietly. “Cold water.”

“There’s no hot water anyway.” Zhu Hong returned with a bottle of water covered in frost crystals. Face set with determination, Zhao Yunlan took a few sips and then dumped the rest of the water over his head.

Zhu Hong and Shen Wei yelled at him simultaneously.

“Are you crazy?!”

“What are you doing?!”

Shen Wei made as if to stop him, but he was too far away. He’d been assiduously avoiding Zhao Yunlan since he’d been caught watching him sleep.

“Lin Jing, stay here and take care of Shen-laoshi and the others.” Zhao Yunlan ignored everyone, his expression dark. Having rinsed his face with the cold water, he wiped it carelessly with his sleeve. He shook out his wrinkled jacket and draped it over his shoulders before striding out, kicking a skull that was in his way. “Everyone else, with me!”

“What about the bones in the garden?” Lin Jing asked hastily.

Zhao Yunlan didn’t even glance back. “Dig them up and smash them.”

Shocked, Lin Jing asked, “Won’t… Won’t that anger something…?”

“If no one bothers me, I won’t drop a single cigarette on their land,” Zhao Yunlan said coldly. “But if they come after me, I will absolutely dig up their ancestors’ graves. Last night we came in politely, and this is how they responded. Now that it’s daytime, the tables have turned. It’s *my* time now, and I’m telling you to smash them all. I’ll deal with any consequences.”

Zhao Yunlan had a bandit’s temper. Once it erupted, he was ruthless; no one dared provoke him further. Lin Jing wisely shut his mouth.

Panting with effort, Zhu Hong had to jog to keep up with him. Finally, she mustered the courage to say quietly, “Wang Zheng probably has her reasons.”

“No shit,” Zhao Yunlan shot back. “Do you have anything to say that’s not useless? If not, shut up.”

Zhu Hong managed to hold her tongue for two seconds. “Can’t you be civil? Do you normally talk like that when you’re hitting on girls?”

Zhao Yunlan finally glanced her way, only to provoke her further. “Do I look like I’m trying to hit on you?”

She desperately wanted to slap him, but didn’t dare. All she could do was lash out viciously. “No wonder you blow every relationship you ever have. I hope you die single!”

Moving fast, Zhao Yunlan led the team back to where they'd left the cars. He pulled a few backpacks from one trunk. "We can't drive the cars up there, so we'll go on foot from here. Take the calorie-dense food and the small water bottles out of the outside pockets and carry them all on you. Even if we get separated and you lose the backpacks, those should keep you going for a while in an emergency."

He dug out a bunch more supplies. "And then there's these." He pushed them toward Zhu Hong. "Take all of this back to the house and divide it among the others."

Zhu Hong stared at him, taken aback. "You're sending me back?"

"Looking human doesn't make you warm blooded." Zhao Yunlan closed the trunk impatiently and locked the car. He called for Chu Shuzhi and Guo Changcheng to follow him, then waved at Zhu Hong. "Go on, woman, before you're frozen solid and have to hibernate. Hurry up and—oh, right. Take this too. Warm it up before you drink it."

He threw her a small bottle. Zhu Hong found herself holding a bottle of yellow rice wine. It had very low alcohol content and was ideal for warming someone up. It was also produced in Jiangnan and therefore hard to find in the great northwest. Zhao Yunlan had obviously packed it as part of his original preparations, and its small size clearly indicated who it was intended for.

Zhu Hong pursed her lips, emotion flickering in her eyes. Zhao Yunlan had already wrangled the others and set off.

To conserve energy, Zhao Yunlan and the other two didn't speak at all as they traveled. In a stroke of good luck, the sun was out. The wind was bitingly cold, but it was less bone-piercing in the sunlight.

Guo Changcheng felt like they'd climbed at least three or four mountains. They had long since veered away from their original destination of Qingxi Village. Sometime past noon, they finally reached a small mountain pass that sheltered them from the wind. By then, they were all nearly frozen solid. Chu Shuzhi ripped open a few packs of beef jerky and divided it between them. Then Zhao Yunlan dug out a map covered in markings and sat cross-legged on a rock to study it.

"Where exactly are we going?" Chu Shuzhi asked. "Do you have any idea?"

Zhao Yunlan made a new mark on the map. Without looking up, he said, "That multi-ethnic region Wang Zheng mentioned is not where Qingxi Village is now. To be honest, I thought that's what she meant at first, but then I looked through her file."

This was a surprise to Chu Shuzhi. He'd been under the impression that Zhao Yunlan had been too blinded by lust recently to think of anything else, and here the boss had actually managed to get some work done. He asked the obvious question. "What's up with her file?"

"Wang Zheng is from the Hanga tribe. Her name used to be Gelan. 'Wang Zheng' is the name she gave herself the year she entered the Soul-Guarding Order," Zhao Yunlan said. "The Hanga weren't friendly or hospitable. Given how much they kept to themselves, they couldn't have lived in a place like Qingxi Village, down on flat land where just anyone could pass by."

Chu Shuzhi hadn't been expecting that either. "There are actual historical records?"

"Not exactly." Zhao Yunlan pointed to three spots on the map. "It's in the *Record of Ancient Sorcery*."

As he spoke, he spread the old map open and tapped a spot with his pen. Chu Shuzhi immediately recognized it as the location of the hut on the mountain.

Zhao Yunlan continued, "When I first went in, I thought the human heads in the yard were probably connected to the legendary Luobula Curse of Constraint. In the Hanga language, 'Luobula' refers to the souls of the dead. In this case, 'constrained' doesn't mean 'forbidden.' It refers to imprisonment." He paused. "Guo Changcheng, why are you all the way over there? Get your ass over here! You've passed your trial period, so as an official employee, can you be a little more engaged in your work?"

Guo Changcheng shuffled over with quick, small steps.

"In other words," Chu Shuzhi said, "it means 'technique to imprison the souls of the dead.'"

"Mm-hmm. Since ancient times, it was the custom of the Hanga to behead people and command the souls of the dead," Zhao Yunlan said. "I think that likely had to do with how their society was structured. Right up to their extinction, the Hanga tribe always practiced slavery in some form. In the records of the Luobula Curse, the Hanga believed they had absolute dominion over their slaves in life *and* death. So slaves who died would be beheaded and their heads sent to the sacrificial altar at the top of the mountain. Up there, their souls would be imprisoned using the forbidden technique—forcing them to serve even in death."

Chu Shuzhi asked, "Why does it have to be at the altar? Is there significance to burying their heads at the mountaintop?"

"Yes. The Hanga once lived among many other ethnic minorities. Even though they didn't marry outside of their tribe, it was inevitable that they were influenced by other religions. A small amount of what was passed down in the Hanga tribe contained the ideology of Bon,[34] although of course the core values were different. You can also see echoes of other groups' malevolent deities among the gods worshipped by the Hanga.

"Unlike Bon beliefs, they clearly didn't believe that all things had spirits, but they did believe that mountains had souls—maybe because they lived in the mountains and were familiar with avalanches. They even believed that the souls of mountains were powerful enough to suppress the souls of the dead. So they erected the sacrificial altar at the 'Opening of the Mountain's Soul'—the side of the peak that doesn't face the light.

"At the same time, they were also influenced by the Buddhist belief in reincarnation. The Luobula Curse was rooted in the belief that the three points of a triangle create the world's deepest well inside. Nothing within can escape its shackles."

Chu Shuzhi was very sharp and caught on immediately. "That means there should be three altars. They must be near each other and at a similar height above sea level, creating an equilateral triangle."

Zhao Yunlan nodded. The three dots he'd drawn on the map formed a near-perfect equilateral triangle. He circled a spot in the triangle's center. "Imprisoning the souls of the dead here, so that they can be ordered about for lifetime after lifetime… I think this must be where the Hanga lived."

“Let me see.” Chu Shuzhi had excellent spatial perception and a sharp sense of direction. He rotated the map to study it. “Look, isn’t this the burning valley from last night?”

“Then that should be it.” Zhao Yunlan quickly stuffed a few beef jerky slices into his mouth. “Hurry and eat, and then we’ll head off.”

Chu Shuzhi chewed the jerky thoughtfully. He was silent for a bit, then glanced at Guo Changcheng, who wasn’t following the conversation at all. After some consideration, he said, “Even though you said it was background research for this trip, you must have already had a certain degree of familiarity with sorcery to be able to put this all together so quickly, right?”

“If you can’t tell the difference between ecstasy and heroin, how can you be a drug enforcement officer?” Zhao Yunlan said lightly.

For once, Chu Shuzhi smiled. But bitterness was too entrenched in his appearance for any smile to really brighten his face. “In that case, why don’t we ‘drug enforcement officers’ receive employee training?”

Zhao Yunlan’s chewing slowed. He turned to stare at Chu Shuzhi, who blatantly stared back.

Guo Changcheng looked back and forth between them without a clue as to what was going on. He was too afraid of them both to ask. He could only shrink in on himself.

Finally, Zhao Yunlan said, “Lao-Chu, you’re smart. I’ve rarely met anyone smarter than you, so I’m not going to waste my breath. You know perfectly well why. Make of it what you will.”

Chu Shuzhi squinted at the beef jerky packaging for a while, as if it might hold the meaning of life. He didn’t reply, and his expression didn’t change. The entire conversation might never have happened. His thoughts were totally inscrutable.

Fifteen minutes later, they set off again. This time, Chu Shuzhi took the lead.

In the morning, the weather had been bright and sunny, but light snow had begun to fall at some point. The three headed west, winding down the mountain for nearly an hour, and then Guo Changcheng glimpsed something in the snow that seemed…very familiar.

He darted over and wiped off the heavy layer of snow with his thick glove. He was astonished when he realized what it was.

Zhao Yunlan only heard Guo Changcheng scream and then start shouting. “Director Zhao! Director Zhao! It’s Wang Zheng’s arm! Wang Zheng’s!”

The kid really is a lucky charm, Zhao Yunlan thought as he headed over with ground-eating strides. He grabbed the plastic arm and rewarded Guo Changcheng with a flick to the forehead. “Wang Zheng’s arm decomposed into dirt ages ago. This is the bootleg product your dumb ass bought. If this is here, where is the rest of her?”

Far too little snow had fallen to cover Wang Zheng’s footsteps, no matter how light her current body was. Zhao Yunlan searched for a while, then had a thought. His eyes snapped up. If she hadn’t walked this way, the arm might have fallen from somewhere above.

Chu Shuzhi followed his gaze, then looked down at the map. He immediately put the pieces together. He patted Zhao Yunlan’s shoulder and pointed upward. “Look

there.”

On a slope less than three meters away was a large cave, half covered by wild grass and white snow. It would ordinarily be well hidden, but the snow that had accumulated at its entrance showed signs of being walked on, which disrupted its camouflage enough to attract Chu Shuzhi’s notice.

Chapter 22

THE FRIEND ZHAO YUNLAN had consulted earlier eventually got in touch with Lin Jing to say it would be at least three or four days before the roads could be cleared. Shen Wei had a quick discussion with his students, reaching the unanimous conclusion that under such horrid circumstances, even if there were survivors in Qingxi Village, they probably wouldn't be in the mood to be interviewed. Shen Wei made the executive decision that they would return to Dragon City with Zhao Yunlan and the others as soon as they got back.

The class leader, in low spirits, heated some water and a small bottle of milk for Daqing as she prepared breakfast for everyone. At their professor's request, the other students were all helping Lin Jing clear the yard. They approached it with a simple, crude method: under Lin Jing's direction, they dug up every single skull that had tried to bite them in the night and placed them, one at a time, in a designated spot. Then the fake monk raised a huge rock and smashed each skull to smithereens.

Zhu Hong came back carrying a bag taller than she was. After she put the supplies down, she warmed the yellow rice wine slightly in the pot and drank it all. Then she took over for Lin Jing, smashing skull after skull until the class leader called them in to eat breakfast. Something had clearly gotten into her. She aggressively shoved past a boy and Daqing, plopped down next to Shen Wei, and quite rudely said, "Chocolate sauce please, Shen-laoshi."

She spread the chocolate sauce over the beef jerky, mixing sweet and savory together. It was hard to say what it might have tasted like. As she ate, she kept stealing glances at Shen Wei, who seemed unbothered.

After some thought, while putting on a show of meticulously applying the chocolate sauce, she spoke again without even looking up. "Our boss is pursuing you."

Shen Wei paused, then tilted his head to look at her. Still looking down, Zhu Hong casually added, as though they were just talking about the weather, "I assume you've noticed?"

Shen Wei seemed to ignore the question. He just handed her a few more packets of chocolate sauce. "Do you want more?"

Now Zhu Hong looked at him, and it was a strange look indeed. As Shen Wei watched, her ordinary round pupils slowly elongated into the vertical pupils of a cold-blooded animal. It was a tremendously creepy look on such a pretty face.

But Shen Wei just turned his attention back to his food as if nothing had happened.

"So do you like him?" Zhu Hong asked quietly.

Perfectly calm, Shen Wei answered her question with one of his own. "Why do you want to know?"

"I… I'm just gossiping." Zhu Hong made up an excuse. "Gossip is the right of every employee who's been exploited and oppressed."

Shen Wei looked at her again with what could've been a smile. "If you're so fond of gossip, how can you not tell?"

When Zhu Hong had no response. Shen Wei laughed softly and took the warmed milk off the stove using a napkin. “You’re eating such dry things,” he said. “Do you want to wash it down with a drink?”

Zhu Hong’s expression twisted. She was gripping the metal thermos in her hand tightly enough to accidentally dent it, but she managed to squeeze out a smile. “Sure, I’ll have some. Thank you!”

Still acting as if nothing was wrong, Shen Wei poured her some milk. “Drink it while it’s warm.”

The dent in Zhu Hong’s thermos deepened.

A smile seemed to flicker in Shen Wei’s eyes. Just as he was about to put the bottle of milk back, something seemed to catch his attention. His head snapped toward the window. As he stared in the direction of the valley, his expression changed.

Zhu Hong wasn’t sure if she was being too sensitive, but there was something deeply unnerving about Shen Wei’s sudden dark look. She instinctively wanted to edge away from him.

But…what did she have to fear from a weak, defenseless university professor?

The sunlight hit Shen Wei’s glasses. The reflection from his lenses was piercing. “I’m full,” Zhu Hong heard him say. “I’ll go clean up the garden. Students, don’t run around, and listen to the officers.” Then he walked out alone.

Somehow his words attracted no real notice from anyone. Even more bizarre, when everyone had finished eating and went out to stretch their legs in the garden, no one noticed that Shen Wei had disappeared. It was as if he had never existed at all. No one, including Zhu Hong and Lin Jing, remembered that there should have been another person with them.

Ten minutes later, the missing professor materialized out of thin air in the spot where Zhao Yunlan and the others had found Wang Zheng’s plastic arm. He wasn’t even wearing a jacket. The north wind swept through the mountains and disturbed his hair and shirt, leaving snow behind on his glasses.

Shen Wei stood under the mountain’s slope and surveyed his surroundings. He suddenly extended an arm, palm down, and made a grabbing motion.

His hand was deathly pale. Blue veins were clearly visible through his skin, as if he were an incredibly detailed recreation of a person. Following his movement, the ground trembled. The wind between the mountains grew fiercer and fiercer. It howled as it began spinning into a vortex, slashing toward the clouds like a blade.

With his hand still in the air, Shen Wei peeled back the ground’s surface, revealing the chapped, frozen earth beneath the heavy snow. It was then that something crawled up out of the ground and flung itself straight at Shen Wei’s back. Arrow-swift, it hurtled toward its defenseless-looking target. A smell started to permeate the air: the stench of rot mixed with a floral fragrance. In a heartbeat, Shen Wei had already pivoted and clamped a hand around his would-be attacker’s neck.

The thing he had grabbed was a youchu. Pure aggression flooded Shen Wei’s gentle, handsome face.

The youchu struggled feebly. Gurgling noises came from its throat.

"Rules are rules," Shen Wei said mildly. "Your kind brazenly crossed the boundaries and left the forbidden area without permission. The penalty is death."

The youchu's feet could no longer touch the ground. It kept struggling, writhing like a fish out of water. Its twitching hands came up in a vain attempt to pry Shen Wei's hand off its neck. Shen Wei's fingers tightened. The youchu in his grasp jerked violently a few times and stopped moving, turning rigid.

He casually tossed the corpse aside. The instant it touched the snowy ground, it vanished. In its place, a strange flower emerged into the frozen world.

Shen Wei ground it underfoot. With a crack, the delicate flower stem snapped in two. He pointed at the ground, and an indistinct black line began to snake its way across the snow, following the faint footprints that ascended the mountain and disappeared into a cave halfway up.

There was a much louder crack. Shen Wei's gaze flashed, and as if frozen, the black line on the ground shattered. A sharp scream rang out in the distance, and seven or eight youchu burst out of the ground. Unlike the ones Zhao Yunlan had seen on the roof, these each stood three meters tall and had bloodred eyes. In unison, they roared at the sky. The mountain, which had so recently suffered an avalanche, was shaking again.

"Puppet," Shen Wei called.

A small gray puff of mist emerged by his feet and rubbed affectionately against his pant leg. When Shen Wei tapped it with a toe, it soared into the air and into the cave.

Next, a pitch-black sword shot out of Shen Wei's hand. The blade was three chi, three cun long, and its spine was unusually thick. It seemed to reflect no light at all, other than the finest thread of snow-bright light along its edge—a light that only the souls that died by the blade were doomed to see.

Shen Wei moved.

Within a single breath, the youchu's heads—and their roars—were cut off. Their massive bodies crashed to the ground only for another group of youchu to emerge, like the wild grass that grew again and again when the spring breeze blew. These were even taller.

It seemed like the adversary would stop at nothing to delay him.

Zhao Yunlan and the others had already been in the cave for quite a while. It had seemed normal enough at first, but the deeper they went, the deeper the darkness became. After turning a corner, they were well and truly out of light, forcing Zhao Yunlan to turn on his flashlight.

After another hundred meters or so, the path ended at a large door. The flashlight's illumination wasn't enough to determine what the door was made of beyond "probably some ancient alloy." It was covered in rust spots. One open-mouthed skull hung above and on each side of the door, and there was an inverted triangle over it.

"A triangle? The Luobula Curse again?" Chu Shuzhi put on gloves and moved closer. First, he very carefully ran his fingers over the door's surface, and then he

pressed his ear against it and knocked lightly. “Some of it is hollow and some is solid,” he reported. “There should be some sort of mechanism, but it’s not complicated. Let me study it for a second.”

Zhao Yunlan gave Guo Changcheng a kick in the butt. “Go closer. Learn from your Chu-ge.”

Guo Changcheng shuffled closer.

The fact was that Chu Shuzhi looked down on him in the way so many arrogant, smart people looked down on dumbasses. But their boss’s presence meant that Chu Shuzhi had no choice but to dutifully explain as he fiddled around. “It’s nothing impressive. The thought processes that go into things like this tend to be similar, so after you’ve seen enough of them, it’ll all fall into place for you.”

As he spoke, he took another small flashlight from his pocket and shined it through the crack in the door, then quickly looked the door over again from top to bottom. By this point he had a pretty good idea of what was going on. “There’s one thick post and thirty-five thin posts inside. That’s thirty-six altogether—a multiple of six. With this kind of thing, the interior is usually all connected.”

He gestured toward Guo Changcheng with his chin. “Squat down. I can’t reach the top, so let me stand on your shoulders.”

Like some sort of large dog, Guo Changcheng squatted down at once.

Chu Shuzhi didn’t even try to be polite about it. Stepping on Guo Changcheng, he began knocking along the door, following the edge of the triangle and the barely visible crack.

It was no easy task to support a grown man’s weight. Chu Shuzhi’s skinniness was outweighed by Guo Changcheng’s uselessness. In no time, Guo Changcheng started shaking, but he gritted his teeth and held on. Sheer fear of letting the man on his back fall kept him from moving.

Just as Guo Changcheng was starting to think he’d already been squashed flat, Chu Shuzhi jumped down and said, “There are thirty-six metal posts behind this door. The mechanism inside means that the hollow spots are made of a different material, so the density is different too. If your hearing is sensitive enough, you’ll be able to tell them apart.”

Guo Changcheng was still on the ground, mouth half open. He couldn’t concentrate on anything but catching his breath, and Chu Shuzhi’s explanation flew completely over his head.

Chu Shuzhi spared him one glance before ignoring him completely; he continued as if addressing Zhao Yunlan, who was standing close behind him. “Once you figure out the basic structure, all that’s left to do is to deduce the details of what’s going on inside there based on experience.”

Having said that, Chu Shuzhi reached up and dug his fingers into the center of the triangle. To Guo Changcheng’s astonishment and fright, a hole was suddenly revealed. Still on his butt, he scuttled backward.

Chu Shuzhi reached inside and felt around for a while, then turned back. “There are thirty-six hidden posts arranged in a circle. I’m guessing you can only pull on three. Which three do you think, Director Zhao?”

“South, northwest, and northeast.” Zhao Yunlan didn’t hesitate at all.

At last, Guo Changcheng felt like he could contribute something. “North, east… Never Eat Soggy Waffles?” he offered.

Chu Shuzhi and Zhao Yunlan ignored him in perfect unison. Guo Changcheng’s tiny sprout of confidence was crushed on the spot, leaving him too nervous to make a peep.

Then there was a heavy pressure on his head as Zhao Yunlan pressed down on him, forcing him to look up. The flashlight’s beam circled the large metal door and stopped on the left side. “What’s that?”

“Uh… M-mountains,” Guo Changcheng said.

Zhao Yunlan firmly turned Guo Changcheng’s head to the right and pointed at the carving on the right-hand side of the door. “And what’s that?”

“Waves… Water?”

“The Hanga tribe lived facing the water, with their backs to the mountain, from halfway up the main peak all the way down to the valley—I told you that just now, dumbass. Since this area is long and narrow, it was difficult for people to differentiate north, south, east, and west. Instead, they thought in terms of up, down, left, right, forward, and backward. ‘Up’ is the direction of the mountain, the main peak to the south. ‘Down’ is the direction of the water, so that’s north. The carving of a mountain indicates south and the carving of the water indicates north. ‘Soggy waffles,’ my ass.” Zhao Yunlan tousled Guo Changcheng’s hair roughly and delivered a harsh verdict. “Even pigs are smarter than you, comrade!”

Guo Changcheng couldn’t even defend himself.

While they were speaking, Chu Shuzhi had pressed down a few times beside the hole. There was a light scraping of metal against metal as the large door slowly opened in front of them.

They were greeted by a damp, rotting smell.

“I’ll go first. Xiao-Guo, follow me, and lao-Chu, bring up the rear.” Zhao Yunlan took a few steps, thought of something, and took an extra gun from under his pant leg. To Guo Changcheng, he said, “Did you pass your firearm qualification exam?”

Guo Changcheng looked at the ground, ashamed. “The examiner said he wouldn’t pass me unless he died and came back to life.”

Zhao Yunlan could only sigh. “What about knives? Do you know how to use those?”

His head hung even lower. “Per… Perhaps?” At Chu Shuzhi’s mocking laugh, he panicked even worse.

“I hired a world peace ambassador.” Zhao Yunlan gave the seemingly endless cave a worried glance. Left with no other choice, he reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a pocket-sized stun baton, throwing it to Guo Changcheng. As if teaching a child who’d just learned to walk how to wipe his butt, he spoke slowly, if impatiently. “Look, hold that. It’s very simple. Hold it like that. That’s all you need to do. When you encounter something dangerous, just hold it in front of yourself. As long as you don’t freeze in terror, you’ll be okay. You can handle that, right?”

Guo Changcheng swung the baton-like thing. Nothing happened. It was like a little flashlight. Of course, it never crossed his mind that his boss might be messing

with him. Instead, he assumed he was too dense to understand Director Zhao's explanation. Guo Changcheng had always been the biggest critic of his own intellect.

But Zhao Yunlan didn't seem inclined to go over it again. After his cursory explanation, he'd set off into the cave with his flashlight, forcing Guo Changcheng to jog to keep up. Guo Changcheng didn't know whether to ask questions or just keep quiet. Common sense told him not to enter a dangerous situation without fully understanding something, but…as he looked at Zhao Yunlan's towering back, all he could think was that if he asked, his boss would absolutely curse him to hell and back.

The mere thought of Zhao Yunlan's anger inspired pure terror. As the feeling washed over him, a blinding spark shot out of the little baton with no warning, heading straight for Zhao Yunlan's back.

Fortunately, Zhao Yunlan was on edge and alert. At the unexpected noise, he threw himself to one side. That scorching hot spark shot farther into the cave.

Again in perfect unison, Chu Shuzhi and Zhao Yunlan exclaimed, "Holy shit!"

Chu Shuzhi looked at Guo Changcheng in awe. This useless piece of trash had actually done something that most SID employees didn't even dare contemplate: fucking up their asshole leader.

Thoroughly disheveled, Zhao Yunlan wiped away the water and mud that the cave wall had left on him. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?!"

"I-I don't know!" Guo Changcheng yelped. "It… It just suddenly went off…"

"No shit! That thing's powered by your fear. The more afraid you are, the more powerful it is. It's practically custom made for you!" Zhao Yunlan was half out of his mind. "You're just walking! What could you *possibly* have been imagining while staring at my back that would scare you that much?!"

There was an awkward silence. Finally, Guo Changcheng raised a shaking hand and pointed at the furious Zhao Yunlan. "Y-you. You right now."

Zhao Yunlan was stunned to speechlessness.

That was more than Chu Shuzhi could handle. He laughed out loud and reached toward Guo Changcheng. "Let me see that."

Chu Shuzhi, usually so cold and arrogant, had actually deigned to speak to him! Overwhelmed by the attention, Guo Changcheng immediately handed his weapon over. Chu Shuzhi shook it next to his ear, then rapped on it with his fingers. Having clearly reached some conclusion, he threw it back to Guo Changcheng and shot Zhao Yunlan a meaningful glance. "Director Zhao, this isn't quite legal, is it?"

It was Zhao Yunlan's turn to laugh. "Pfft! Don't give me that law-abiding citizen act—watch out!"

He shoved Guo Changcheng to the side and dropped down to one knee. There was a loud noise, and a fierce wind blew past his scalp, carrying a rancid smell. Something huge and comb-like flew at them. The thing's base was carved from thick, heavy wood over three meters long, and it was bristling with sharp blades. If it so much as touched a human, there'd be nothing left of them but a heap of minced meat.

Chu Shuzhi stood plastered to the wall. With a flick, a stack of paper talismans appeared in his hand.

The giant "comb" turned in midair and came hurling back at them from above. The paper talismans whipped from Chu Shuzhi's hand like flying darts and stuck to the many blades. It seemed he might have chosen the wrong talismans; for whatever reason, the thing wasn't affected at all. Its downward slice continued with a gut-churning wind.

Zhao Yunlan's gun had already settled in his hand.

But then Guo Changcheng, always a beat behind everyone else, suddenly reacted. A bloodcurdling scream exploded out of him. "Mommy!"

His wail was immediately followed by a roaring blaze, a full two or three meters high, surging out of the little "baton" he held. It was akin to a gas explosion. Zhao Yunlan and Chu Shuzhi dove out of the way as the raging flames struck dozens of blades. The "comb" overhead came to a complete stop. It gave a violent shudder and then succumbed to the fire, melting into a soup that splashed to the ground, sizzling as it fell.

For a full minute, no one spoke.

Eventually, Chu Shuzhi stiffly turned his head to look at Guo Changcheng, who was sitting on the ground. With utter sincerity, from the bottom of his heart, he said, *"Damn."*

Guo Changcheng was too scared to do anything but sit there, his mind completely blank.

"I thought you'd just sealed an earthbound spirit into a regular baton. Resentful spirits and little ghosts feed on fear and turn it into their own energy," Chu Shuzhi said to their boss. "What… What *exactly* did you make?"

Zhao Yunlan straightened his clothes. It was his turn to play the law-abiding citizen. "Sealing a soul is illegal. As a trusted servant of the people, how could I knowingly commit a crime?"

Chu Shuzhi waited.

"Instead, it contains scraps of souls from a hundred beheaded evil spirits. I got most of them from the Soul-Executing Emissary and acquired some from reapers using spirit money. Then I mixed the scraps with True Flames of Samadhi."[35]

Chu Shuzhi was on the brink of a complete breakdown. "Where did the fire come from?"

"Last year when we went to capture that Bi Fang[36] that escaped, I borrowed some fire from it to light a cigarette. I saved a spark."

There was nothing Chu Shuzhi could say to that. He had a thug of a boss who straddled the line between dark and light, and who was bros with everyone in the Three Realms. He had to admit there might be no hope of his long-cherished wish—beating Zhao Yunlan up—coming true.

Zhao Yunlan was about to warn them to be careful when a distant whistling began. A glowing gray mist drifted over, settling into Zhao Yunlan's arms. The light and mist vanished the moment they touched him, and a letter appeared in his hand.

It was in a pitch-black envelope with bloodred writing and a familiar scent.

Chu Shuzhi's expression turned serious. He'd just started to step forward but now quickly retracted that half step. Meanwhile, Zhao Yunlan moved forward to put himself further away from Guo Changcheng and the possibility of more friendly fire.

Behind him, Chu Shuzhi asked, “The Soul-Executing Emissary?”

“Mm-hmm.” Zhao Yunlan ripped open the envelope, only to stare in concern at the contents.

The Soul-Executing Emissary had always been a wordy writer. He was incapable of getting to the point without a polite preface, all but inquiring after the health of every one of Zhao Yunlan’s aunts. Only after all that preamble would he address the topic at hand, and *that* would be concise, demonstrating his grace when it came to complex matters.

This letter, on the other hand, was clearly rushed, with no introduction or conclusion. It was terse enough that it could have been a sticky note.

“Danger. Do not give chase. Hurry back.”

Chu Shuzhi craned his neck. “Why would the Emissary send a letter here? What happened?”

Zhao Yunlan folded the letter and stuffed it into his pocket, thinking things over. The Emissary usually sent his “Lone Soul” notices to the SID office. If there wasn’t a genuine emergency, he wouldn’t have tracked them down out here. After all, he didn’t want to be seen by unrelated parties.

Why did he suddenly…

And…how did he know where Zhao Yunlan was?

Zhao Yunlan hesitated for a moment, looked at his confused subordinates, and then said, “Lao-Chu, take him back first. Meet up with Lin Jing and the others.”

“Why?” Chu Shuzhi asked.

“Are we not going to go find Wang Zheng-jie?” Guo Changcheng questioned.

“I can do that on my own. You two head back.” Zhao Yunlan patted Guo Changcheng’s shoulder. “Hold on to the thing I gave you and be careful on your way. Once you get back to the others, help Lin Jing destroy that sacrificial altar. Don’t let Shen Wei and his students run around. Wait until the rescue team clears the roads.”

Even though Zhao Yunlan hadn’t revealed anything, Chu Shuzhi still felt a little uneasy. “You’re continuing by yourself?”

Zhao Yunlan nodded and said nothing else.

Chu Shuzhi’s brow creased. Then he pulled decisively on Guo Changcheng, who still wanted to say something. “Let’s go.”

“But…”

“But what? Don’t waste time. The boss wants to wrap this up so he can go back to his romance. Hurry up.”

Even as Chu Shuzhi dragged him back to the cave’s entrance, Guo Changcheng kept looking worriedly back at Zhao Yunlan.

Zhao Yunlan had his flashlight tucked into the crook of his elbow. His hands, in their leather gloves, were shoved into his jacket pockets. He stood and watched his subordinates until they were out of sight before he turned to continue deeper into the cave.

The gray shadow that had dissipated earlier came back out of nowhere. It coalesced into a little skeleton the height of a four- or five-year-old child. Standing in

front, staring up at him, it extended its thin, white arms to block his way.

"Oh? There are puppets this small? Did the Soul-Executing Emissary send you to follow me?" Zhao Yunlan raised a brow. "I've got things to do. Move."

It might only have been the puppet's size that gave this impression, but there seemed to be a childlike innocence in the dark holes of its eye sockets. It didn't appear to understand human language, as it didn't nod or shake its head. It just stood there, not letting him pass.

Zhao Yunlan rubbed his chin. He was a bit surprised that the Soul-Executing Emissary, who spoke so little, understood him so well. If a large puppet had tried to pull this stunt, he probably would have kicked it to pieces on the spot. But he couldn't quite bring himself to harm this tiny, thin-boned creature that couldn't even communicate.

"Are you going to move or not?" he asked.

The puppet's jaw moved with a cracking noise.

Zhao Yunlan shook his head and took a large step. His long legs carried him effortlessly over the little skeleton, and he continued on his way.

The poor thing clearly didn't understand what had just happened. It craned its neck so far to see what he was doing that its head nearly fell off. After a fierce struggle to maintain its balance, it rushed after him. As soon as it caught up, it grabbed the corner of his shirt and refused to let go.

Zhao Yunlan didn't bother wasting his breath. He just kept walking, dragging the little skeleton along. It wasn't as if it was heavy.

The skeleton puppet would have been crying its eyes out by then if it had any.

The farther he got, the heavier the stench of decay became. The air grew more and more humid. The ancient, well-worn stairs narrowed as they descended. By the time they reached the bottom, Zhao Yunlan felt like the little skeleton was getting in the way. He bent down and picked it up, carrying it on his shoulders like a child. Then he checked his watch.

Clarity's watch plate seemed eerily quiet. After staring at it for a few seconds, Zhao Yunlan realized its hands had started moving backward—or at least one of them had. The second hand was moving in reverse, but the minute hand was moving forward and the hour hand was stuck at twelve o'clock. Some strange force seemed to be bringing the three hands together.

When they finally converged at twelve o'clock, they stayed there, as if dead.

Zhao Yunlan scraped a bit of the mud from the wall and brought it to his nose.

"It might just be my imagination," he said, talking to himself or maybe to the little puppet on his shoulders, "but I feel like I'm already dead and buried."

The little puppet made a cracking noise. It suddenly extended a sharp finger and poked the side of Zhao Yunlan's face lightly. Then it pointed at the nearby wall and made a few more cracking sounds.

Zhao Yunlan aimed his flashlight in the direction the finger was pointing. A line of text was illuminated.

"You may not have eyes, but you sure can see. Good catch. This is in the Hanga language." He drew closer and touched it gently. "Well, strictly speaking, the Hanga didn't have their own writing. I'd say this is a special incantation."

The little puppet cracked some more.

"Don't ask me, I'm not a walking PowerWord dictionary. Who the fuck knows what it means?" Half to himself, Zhao Yunlan said, "But I know that in Hanga culture, smooth, curved lines represent gentle, peaceful things, and hard, angled symbols rarely mean anything good. For example, the souls of the dead were imprisoned by a triangle, and that octagon I haven't had time to look into…"

His fingers paused. The line of text ended in an octagon.

"This one right here," he said. "Great. Here comes the scary stuff."

A huge noise cut him off. The entire cave began shaking, nearly knocking him off his feet. The little puppet grabbed his collar and buried its long, thin fingers in his hair. Zhao Yunlan squinted and saw a stream of fire racing toward them, whistling. He held on to the wall, hugging the little puppet with one arm. His face was red from the reflection of the flames. But while the leaping fire was also reflected in his pitch-black pupils, there was something icy in how they shone.

Zhao Yunlan patted the little puppet, who was desperately trying to burrow into his arms. "Stop pulling at my clothes. If you're afraid, hide inside my watch."

Fear had long since driven its master's task from the puppet's mind. Terrified, it turned into gray mist and fled into the watch. A moment later, the fire washed over Zhao Yunlan, who had nowhere to run.

He already had a talisman in his hand. But despite the roaring flames around him, the talisman didn't ignite. Nor did he feel any heat.

Zhao Yunlan froze and looked up from within the fire. It towered over him, filling his vision with aggressive flames that swept through the entire cavern.

Suddenly, the intangible flames disappeared. With no help from him, the mud on the wall inscribed with the octagon crumbled and flaked off.

Something occurred to him. He caught the flaking mud, and larger chunks began to fall. Zhao Yunlan swept some of it away and, with the help of his flashlight, made out a faint mural.

With the passage of time, the revealed art had largely rotted away, and whatever it was expressing was extremely abstract. An archaeologist might have understood it, but it was beyond Zhao Yunlan, even if he'd examined it up close for long enough to risk damaging his vision.

He quickly lost interest and started to move on, only to immediately stop again as a thought struck him. He turned back and studied the mural carefully from five steps away. The flashlight's beam slid across the surface, tilted upward forty-five degrees to the three o'clock position, then tilted down forty-five degrees…

There was a huge octagonal shape on the mural, with a tiny octagon at each of its eight points.

Zhao Yunlan looked at the shape that had been hidden within the mural. He patted down his chest, then pulled a wallet from his jacket's inner pocket. In among the change and bank receipts was a piece of wrinkled yellowing paper with curling edges, torn out of an old book. In fact, it was the page from the *Record of Ancient Sorcery* that described the Luobula Curse. He'd had it on him all along, but it wasn't exactly something he could have shown Chu Shuzhi.

The page was illustrated with a fanged monster. It had six arms but only two legs, each limb pointing at a point of an octagon. It looked ferocious, with a mouth wide open in anger. A small mountain was depicted in its mouth, and there was a pitch-black octagon on the left side of its chest.

"The mountain is in its mouth, and this thing is at its heart…" Zhao Yunlan muttered. He slapped the large map he was carrying up against the wall. Placing the illustration of the monster against it, he slowly rotated the map until south was facing up. Marking a line with his nails, he connected the mountain in the monster's mouth with the octagon on its chest and extended the line in both directions. His fingers landed in the most concave area of the valley.

The huge fire in the valley, the skulls at the peak of the mountain, the many restricted techniques of a long-extinct tribe… There seemed to be a deeper layer of secrets beneath everything.

Why had Wang Zheng suddenly abandoned her companions and come here all by herself?

Why was she so adamant about her remains, which had already been buried for hundreds of years?

Zhao Yunlan was getting a bad feeling.

He started moving again, going deeper and deeper into the cave. It kept narrowing around him until he could barely raise his head. By the time he reached the end, his back was almost in open rebellion.

He was confronted by another speckled door. It depicted a terrifying, awe-inspiring monster with six arms and two legs, almost identical to the one on the page he was carrying. The only difference was that this one's expression seemed fearful.

The instant his hand touched the door, his chest tightened. He shoved the door open and found himself standing halfway up the other side of the mountain. Right below him was that mysterious valley. He suddenly felt like he was standing in the middle of a roaring ocean. Seawater was battering him in the chest, pressing against him with tremendous weight until he couldn't breathe.

It was clearly still daytime, but the sun was covered in such dense layers of clouds that not even a thread of sunlight could peek through. Zhao Yunlan walked forward.

His first step seemed to set something off. A silent sigh came from the depths of the earth, like water ripples spreading in circles from the Hanga tribe's back mountain. There was something in this valley—something terrible and great.

Zhao Yunlan continued toward the valley. The air grew thinner and thinner, increasing the sensation of pressure on his chest. His temples felt like something was clamping down on them. His pulse pounded in his ears, and his vision started to dim. Slowly, he adjusted his breathing. Breathing too heavily would exhaust him too quickly.

He pinched his palm. A peculiar feeling was stirring in his heart. If there was something Wang Zheng couldn't let go of after all this time, even after becoming a ghost, it definitely wasn't her corpse, which had been reduced to bone long ago. It was this.

The little puppet's head suddenly poked up out of his watch. Its jaw clicked randomly. Whatever it was trying to tell him, it was clearly a scaredy-cat. It wanted to

stop him but was too afraid to come out of the watch. Zhao Yunlan just pressed it back inside.

His expression grew more solemn as he continued under the immense pressure. He pulled three yellow paper talismans from his chest pocket. These three were different from the others. The corner of each one read "Soul-Guarding Order" in tiny script, written in cinnabar. If the black cat had been there, he would have recognized the legendary Soul-Guarding Order.

Zhao Yunlan didn't seem to be doing anything, but every three steps, a Soul-Guarding Order ignited in his hand. When the last one had burnt to nothing, three whip cracks sounded. From thin air, a long whip appeared in his hand. The whip extended as if it were alive, pulling him forward…until he caught sight of a white shadow about to melt under the daylight.

Grim faced, he flicked his wrist and sent the long whip lashing in that direction. It coiled around the white shadow and dragged it to him.

Wang Zheng's plastic body was long gone. Her soul had been horrifically weakened, but her eyes were still open. She looked at him with the calm of someone about to die.

"You've completely lost your mind." Zhao Yunlan caught hold of her and shoved her into his watch, cursing. His heart hurt like hell—it felt like it was about to explode from pain. "This fucking place!"

Having found Wang Zheng, he meant to leave immediately, but something seemed to call to him. His eyes were drawn to where she had been standing. A huge stone pillar stood there, dozens of meters tall. It was blacker than night, wide at the top and narrow on the bottom, like a huge wedge nailed into the ground. Its base was a dilapidated sacrificial altar. The altar stone had been covered in Hanga curses, and below it there was an offering table laden with bloody sacrifices. The sacrifices looked for all the world as if they had just been placed there.

The instant Zhao Yunlan's gaze fell on that giant stone, countless faces appeared on it—a dense tapestry of them, every single one shrieking in agony. The sound stabbed into his ears. It was a chorus of absolute human suffering, screamed in unison by thousands upon thousands of people.

A weight like a massive rock pressed down on Zhao Yunlan's chest. There was a buzzing in his ears, and excruciating pain rapidly spread through his entire body. He leaned down to vomit a mouthful of blood and couldn't straighten up again. Knees buckling under the pain, he fell backward, and for a few seconds, he couldn't see or hear.

I can't pass out here. Hand sticky with blood, he made a decisive grab for the knife sheathed to his calf, then aimed the knife for his own palm.

As the blade descended, an icy hand grabbed it by the hilt. Someone's arms closed around him from behind, dragging him into an embrace. Through the reek of blood, he smelled something…familiar. It was the light, chilly fragrance that came from the end of the Huangquan.

The Soul-Executing Emissary…?

The knife in Zhao Yunlan's hand clattered to the ground. He relaxed, passing out completely.

Chapter 23

THE SOUL-EXECUTING EMISSARY'S black robes were like a thick mist, impenetrable even by sunlight. They abruptly billowed up to form a protective screen several stories high, engulfing them both. They were cut off from the sunlight and everything else.

While holding him, the Emissary lifted Zhao Yunlan's hand and pressed on his watch. "Come out!" His voice was quiet, but the command was unmistakable.

The little puppet floated out hesitantly. Its lowered head was shockingly large compared to its small body. The Emissary glanced at it, then raised a hand and summoned it back into his sleeve. "Get in here."

The puppet didn't dare say anything. It obediently turned into gray mist, taking care to curl up into a perfect ball, and rolled into his sleeve.

Wang Zheng had also emerged. She took a half step back, looking at Zhao Yunlan worriedly. When the Emissary's frigid gaze fell on her, she began trembling.

The Emissary sat on the ground, carefully shifting the man in his arms into a more comfortable position. "You're under his command. Whether you were right or wrong is not for me to judge. Sit to the side for now."

Wang Zheng didn't dare approach him. She hesitated for a moment, then found herself the farthest possible corner to sit down in, right along the edge of the protection he'd raised.

The Emissary seemed to be taking great care to keep Zhao Yunlan from getting dirty even though Zhao Yunlan had already made a mess of himself. When the Emissary carefully set the Soul-Executing Blade aside, Wang Zheng got a look at it—and the bloodstained hilt.

From within a vast sleeve reminiscent of a black hole, a deathly pale hand emerged. The Emissary wiped the blood from the corner of Zhao Yunlan's mouth almost tenderly. His fingertips lingered barely perceptibly where they grazed Zhao Yunlan's lips. The air was charged with an indescribable tension, as if the Emissary would lean down and kiss him at any moment.

Wang Zheng didn't dare make a sound, but her eyes widened in shock.

When Zhao Yunlan woke up, he found his head cushioned on someone's shoulder. He felt like he'd just been through a particularly awful bout of vomiting that had battered his innards. His entire body felt weak. With great difficulty, he sat up and opened his eyes to find the Soul-Executing Emissary beside him. "You…"

An icy finger sealed his lips. The Emissary pressed a supportive hand to his back and said, voice low, "Do not speak. Focus."

A gentle but cold energy accompanied the words, flowing slowly from the Emissary's palm. Zhao Yunlan shivered, but he didn't pull away. As the energy flowed, he closed his eyes and entrusted his wounded body wholly to the Emissary's care.

The Soul-Executing Emissary's coldness was said to spring from his innate ruthlessness and cruelty, but it was comfort spreading through Zhao Yunlan now, the churning in his chest slowly calming.

Zhao Yunlan couldn't help admiring the Emissary. In all the years he'd been in charge of the Soul-Guarding Order, whenever he encountered truly heinous crimes or the most unbelievable situations, the Emissary had always personally arrived to take care of it. They had always had a partnership. In all that time, Zhao Yunlan had never seen the Emissary act rudely or lose control. He always seemed so calm, modest, and amiable. With some sort of extreme self-restraint, that innate cruelty was suppressed to the point that not a hint of it was detectable.

Extreme restraint is sometimes exercised in pursuit of extreme freedom. If someone could mercilessly quash their very nature for hundreds of thousands of years, then on the one hand, it would be an excruciating existence…but on the other hand, what an incredible person they would have to be.

After some time, the soul-deep pain gradually faded. Zhao Yunlan opened his eyes again and was able to sit up easily. "Thank you, thank you. Good thing you were here. Clearly, my luck has gone downhill enough lately that now it's starting to improve."

The Emissary withdrew his hand a bit reluctantly. Having broken contact, he backed up a little. Politely, he said, "Think nothing of it. But you should have heeded my warning, Guardian."

"It's all because of that damned girl." With his chin, Zhao Yunlan indicated Wang Zheng, not far away. "Every person at 4 Bright Avenue matters. As long as it's work hours, they're all my people. I can't just leave her."

His expression darkened as he addressed her directly. "Get the fuck over here!"

Wang Zheng floated over silently. Zhao Yunlan swung his whip toward her, and Wang Zheng reflexively closed her eyes, but the whip didn't touch her. Instead it brushed past her, then curled in on itself midair. It swept over the ground, leaving a deep white mark.

"Why are you closing your eyes? I don't hit women. Get over here." The long whip turned into a paper talisman and drifted into Zhao Yunlan's hand. There was still some blood on the corner. Zhao Yunlan's gaze swept past the blood to glance at Wang Zheng. "The Soul-Guarding Order isn't enough to order you around anymore, is it?"

Wang Zheng said nothing. She just knelt in front of him.

Zhao Yunlan wasn't having any of it. "Don't kneel either. What are you kneeling for? My wallet's still in the car. I don't have red-pocket money to give you."

Wang Zheng bit her lip.

Zhao Yunlan glowered at her, expression unkind. He took a cigarette from his pocket and put it between his lips, but as he was looking for his lighter, a hand suddenly plucked the cigarette away.

Zhao Yunlan touched his nose. Somehow, that felt a little familiar.

"I've checked your file," Zhao Yunlan told her. He rubbed his fingers together, unused to having them empty. "You died in 1713—the second year of the inner turmoil that you said the Hanga tribe suffered. What happened? You wanted to find your corpse—where is it? Did you place all those offerings under that huge pillar? What *is* that?"

The Soul-Executing Emissary interjected. "That 'huge pillar' is known as the Mountain-River Awl."

The name sounded familiar. Zhao Yunlan thought about it, brow furrowed in thought. "One of the Four Hallowed Artifacts?"

The Emissary nodded. "The Guardian is knowledgeable."

First the Reincarnation Dial, now the Mountain-River Awl… The Four Hallowed Artifacts had been lost in the Mortal Realm for years on end. It wasn't like they were cabbages in the market going for twenty cents a pound. And just coincidentally encountering *two* of them within six months…? If Zhao Yunlan really had that kind of dumb luck, he should have been buying lottery tickets as a profession.

He couldn't help but lean into the conspiracy theory forming in his mind. The Dragon City University administrative building that was suspiciously spotless when he'd gone back; the Hunger Ghost that had just *happened* to set its sights on Li Qian; the random disappearance of the Reincarnation Dial, which had yet to turn up; the warrant for the youchu…and the Soul-Executing Emissary's sudden warning.

Zhao Yunlan's face turned serious. "What exactly is the Mountain-River Awl?"

"People say that the powers beyond us control life and death, but that is not the genuine truth," said the Emissary. "Since the dawn of Chaos, at the beginning of all things, good and evil have always existed. The very earliest judgment of good and evil was carved into the Mountain-River Awl. The Awl was formed from the essence of hundreds of thousands of rivers and mountains. It starts above the Nine Heavens and pierces all the way down to below the Huangquan. The punishments of the Eighteen Levels of Hell are all carved on it. As time passed, it was also the basis of many judgments in the *Book of Life and Death*. To this day, people believe that the mountains and water have souls. That belief goes all the way back to those times." The Emissary paused. "Because the Mountain-River Awl was initially used for sealing and suppression, tens of thousands of evil spirits have been bound within it over time, condemned to obey. I never imagined that after it was lost, it fell into the hands of those who would seal generations of their people inside it for eternity.

"Other people can approach it without harm, but you…" An unfamiliar hesitance entered the Emissary's voice as he considered his choice of words. He continued at last, "You were born with an unstable soul. If you draw too close to these soul-sealing objects, of course you will feel the effects more than others."

No one had ever said such a thing to Zhao Yunlan before. Caught off guard, he said, “An unstable soul? Me? My ethereal and corporeal souls[37] are all just fine! Why would they be unstable?”

The Soul-Executing Emissary fell silent again, then said, “Everyone has one True Flame of Samadhi on each shoulder and one on their head. You were born with no fire on your left shoulder—a phenomenon known as ‘ghost-touched shoulder.’ That makes your souls prone to instability. The Guardian should take more care in the future.”

Zhao Yunlan gave his own left shoulder a dubious look, then quickly lost interest and got back to the subject at hand. “So you’re saying the Hanga used the Mountain-River Awl to perform the Luobula Curse, right?”

The Emissary nodded. “They would burn the beheaded person’s body, then use the Three-Star Method of Gathering Yin to forcibly detain the person’s soul in the valley. That resulted in the individual being drawn into the Mountain-River Awl, after which the Hanga used the heads to command the dead souls within the Awl.”

Pointing at Wang Zheng, Zhao Yunlan asked, “What about her?”

The Emissary glanced at Wang Zheng. She shivered, suddenly feeling as though everything that had happened during and after her life was laid out before him.

“This young woman died when she was beheaded, but managed to escape the Yin Gathering Spell and the Mountain-River Awl. The likeliest explanation is that someone preserved her body and head properly.”

Wang Zheng managed a bleak smile. “Back then, I was very immature and bitter. The previous Guardian caught me when I possessed someone. I was taken in under the Soul-Guarding Order and have been there ever since. ‘Wang Zheng’ isn’t my original name. It belonged to the girl I possessed. In life, my name was Gelan. I was the daughter of the chief who died in the rebellion.”

Zhao Yunlan came to the annoying realization that his Special Investigations Department was basically a summer camp for nepotism babies.

“The leader of the rebellion was named Sangzan,” Wang Zheng continued. “He was a slave’s son—his mother was my mother’s hair-combing maid. In our tribe, there were no ordinary people. There were the tribe’s leader and nobility, and then there were slaves. So Sangzan naturally also grew up to be a slave. He was brave and hardworking and stood out among all of the tribe’s slaves. He became my father’s horse keeper. By modern standards, you’d say he was a handsome, talented man whom everyone admired.”

There was pure bitterness in her smile now. “Unfortunately, among our tribe, a slave was just a slave no matter how talented they might be. A slave’s life had no more value than the lives of livestock. They could be bought, sold, or dealt with anywhere. Sangzan was handsome and rich, but he was denied dignity.

“Eventually, my father took a fancy to a young female slave—Sangzan’s little sister. When he got her pregnant, my mother was furious. She took her anger out on Sangzan’s mother and found an excuse to behead her. My older brother whipped Sangzan’s father to death. And Sangzan’s sister…my father had forced her to begin with. After all of that, she hanged herself with a horse whip.”

Zhao Yunlan dug out the last pack of beef jerky and began eating it. “So your dad was a total piece of shit.”

Wang Zheng didn’t respond. Seeing that Zhao Yunlan’s mood was still sour, the Emissary coughed dryly and made an attempt at smoothing things over. “I noticed, beneath the offerings, there was originally a sacrificial stone under the Mountain-River Awl. The ordinary use of such a thing would be to record the names of all the souls suppressed by the Awl. The stone is still there, but the names have been removed. Did that also happen during the rebellion?”

Wang Zheng nodded. “Sangzan led his brothers to victory. When they finally reached the forbidden area where the Mountain-River Awl is, he said that from then on, everyone in the tribe could live equally and with dignity. He used a huge file to grind away all the names on the stone. The chief… My father, mother, older brother, and the other nobles, as well as their entourage and guards, were all hanged and decapitated in the yard of the Mountain Keeper’s hut. After that, the Hanga tribe never had slaves or nobility again.”

“What about you?” Zhao Yunlan asked. “You weren’t executed at the time because you secretly helped Sangzan, right?”

Wang Zheng looked down. “We’d known each other since we were little. When Father sent someone to capture him, I was the one who hid him. I just didn’t want him to die. I didn’t know—I had no way of knowing what would happen after that.”

Chapter 24

BROW FURROWED, Zhao Yunlan looked at Wang Zheng.

She stared straight at the ground. When she stared in one direction like that, it always made her look like she was spacing out. Eventually, she spoke again, voice soft. “I was still so young. I wasn’t even seventeen yet. I was completely naive and didn’t understand anything. I couldn’t see anything but what was happening right in front of me, and in my head. I only knew to follow one path all the way to the end.

“I was…childhood friends with Sangzan. Our positions were very different, but I never saw him as an outsider. Father wanted to kill him, but of course—of course I was against it. To be honest, I blamed my father at the time. I thought what he’d done was wrong, and it also embarrassed me. He was our chief and my wonderful father! How could he have done something so despicable?”

Zhao Yunlan held his tongue. His expression was still ugly, but he sighed faintly.

After another pause, Wang Zheng asked, “Is there anywhere in this world where everyone is free and equal?”

“There is,” said Zhao Yunlan.

Wang Zheng and the Soul-Executing Emissary both turned toward him. There was still a speck of blood on his bottom lip, and his complexion was extra pale. Against the collar of his gray shirt, he looked a little worse for wear. Only his eyes were startlingly bright. Zhao Yunlan’s eyes always shone brilliantly, as if nothing in the world could quench their light.

“When facing death,” he said.

The Emissary couldn’t help replying. “The Guardian’s words are too cold. If that is so, why do mortals spend their lives seeking and struggling so bitterly?”

“My lord, you need to look beyond the surface.” Zhao Yunlan looked up. “What constitutes fairness or equality? The reality is that what’s fair for one person is always built upon someone else being treated unfairly. When someone is struggling to survive, ‘equal’ means being well fed and warmly dressed, like everyone else. Once they have a full belly and warm clothes, ‘equal’ means having as much dignity as everyone else. And once they have dignity, a sense of superiority kicks in and they won’t be satisfied until they have more than other people. Nothing breaks the cycle but a coffin. Equality is in the eye of the beholder, isn’t it?”

The Emissary was speechless. Finally he gave a grim laugh. “Your logic is preposterous.”

Zhao Yunlan moved on. To Wang Zheng, he said, “So Sangzan successfully rebelled, killed your father, and removed the names from the sacrificial altar. No more slaves for the Hanga. What happened then?”

“After that, whenever there was an issue in the tribe, each family would choose a head of their household to raise their own suggestions. Everyone would discuss it and then listen to the one with the most support,” she said. “That was Sangzan’s idea. He had never attended school or left the snowy mountains, but he already understood the concept of democracy that would become prevalent many years later. No matter

the era, humans want similar things."

Zhao Yunlan propped up one long leg, resting his hands on his knees. Despite his casual slouch, his words were like knives, each one sharper than the last. "And that's how you died, isn't it?"

Caught off guard, Wang Zheng froze. She hadn't expected him to piece things together so quickly. The light in her eyes dimmed.

"I… I had nowhere to go. My only choice was to stay in Sangzan's house and be entirely reliant on him. But I didn't know how to do anything. I was the chief's daughter. From childhood on, my mother only taught me how to dress myself and order slaves around. I didn't know how to do chores, hunt, or run a household.

"Another girl in the tribe wanted to marry Sangzan and begged her father to ask him about marriage. Sangzan refused. She was furious and ran away from the mountain, and by the time she was found, she was already dead. They said she'd lost her footing, fallen down the mountain, and hit her head on a rock. Her father hated me after that. He and the other families banded together and said I was the bastard chief's daughter. They said I knew witchcraft, and that I refused to correct my ways even though they'd forgiven me and let me live. They said I was lazy and useless and would do anything to hold on to their hero, Sangzan. That I was jealous and cursed that man's daughter to die. He… He wanted to behead me."

Wang Zheng's shoulders began to shake. She had once truly believed with her entire being that her father was wrong. In that innocent young girl's heart, she'd known that her fellow people shouldn't be slaves. They were *people*. They had worth. No one else should have power over their lives or deaths. Just like Sangzan, she had hoped they could all live in prosperity and that they could be equal, free, and happy.

But the people she'd sympathized with and loved had hated and resented her.

"The girl's father had everyone vote with a show of hands. Not moving meant they were neutral on whether or not I should be executed. A raised hand meant agreeing that I should be beheaded…" Wang Zheng couldn't hold it in anymore. Her voice cracked on "beheaded."

The day was crystal clear in her memory. Everyone had been present, their faces full of glee. In the stands were row after row of raised hands. Seen from the platform, those hands had seemed like the claws of monsters from the river at the heart of the Netherworld. Nearly every hand was raised.

All those people had looked at the young girl bound in front of them and shown her only coldness, numbness, ignorance, and cruelty.

Together, they had all come to a shocking agreement: kill her. Cut off her head.

Faced with that, even if someone's heart had contained millions of bright lights, all light would be extinguished. There could be nothing left but ash.

No one had remembered what she'd done, or at least…they'd believed that she'd acted for selfish reasons.

Wang Zheng wept. As her tears fell to the ground and turned to fleeting wisps of smoke, her figure became lighter and clearer. Three hundred years after her death, her tears should have been long since exhausted, but in this moment of pure anguish, she shed tears made of her own essence, weeping her soul away.

"Don't cry." Zhao Yunlan touched her chin lightly and wiped her tears, a soul-stabilizing talisman between his fingers. With a quiet exclamation, he pressed the

talisman to her forehead. Her tears were instantly sealed off, preventing any more from escaping. She stared at him, eyes large and still filled with almost childlike innocence. Meeting his gentle, inscrutable gaze, she had the sudden conviction that he knew and understood everything.

He held Clarity out to her. “Come inside first.”

She went still for a moment, then felt a soft, inexorable force pulling her into the stopped watch. She heard Zhao Yunlan say quietly, “I’ll let you out after it gets dark.” Then she was gone.

Zhao Yunlan and the Soul-Executing Emissary stared at each other with nothing to say. Zhao Yunlan’s eyes drifted closed as if he was exhausted. After a silence, the Emissary patted his shoulder. “Do not sleep yet. You were injured by the shock waves from the Mountain-River Awl. If you sleep here, you will undo the work I did to stabilize your soul. Rest a little later. Does your chest still feel tight?”

Zhao Yunlan rubbed his forehead roughly. “I’m all right,” he said, voice hoarse. “I’ve just been dizzy all day since that girl drugged me so carelessly.”

“Perhaps I could take you back first and then return for the Awl.”

Zhao Yunlan waved a hand and forced himself to alertness. A little pained, he asked, “Can I have a smoke?”

The Emissary was silent.

Zhao Yunlan took that for agreement, backed a few steps away, and quickly lit a cigarette. He took two deep puffs like a practiced addict, not inflicting even a hint of secondhand smoke on the Emissary. Every trace went into his lungs. Finally, he seemed much more awake. “I’m fine. Spitting blood clears out toxins too. I didn’t realize that was the Mountain-River Awl just now, so it caught me off guard. No need to worry about me, my lord. You should just hurry and grab that thing. The early bird got the Reincarnation Dial last time—don’t delay on my account.”

Having said all that, he stood up and put his cigarette out in the snow. He took a wrinkled talisman from his pocket, crushed it up, and popped it into his mouth. As he chewed on the tough ball of paper, he said, “Let’s go. You first, my lord?”

The Emissary nodded and took down the boundless gray mist around them. They were once again facing the Mountain-River Awl.

Zhao Yunlan had eaten a soul-stabilizing talisman at the last moment, but he could still feel the Awl’s power—a soul-shaking ruthlessness with great destructive power. He stood tall and focused on the massive thing, and came to the realization that the Awl’s cross section was an octagon, regular and sharp, plunging straight into the center of the earth.

The Soul-Executing Emissary took a few dozen steps and then stopped, his hands clasped. A fierce gale suddenly swept over the ground. His black hood and robes billowed as if the whistling wind might tear them away, but he somehow remained shrouded within the black mist, nothing visible beneath.

The Emissary called out in a deep voice, “Soul of the Mountain!”

The Mountain-River Awl began to shake, followed by the ground. In moments, the entire snowy mountain seemed to be rumbling. A roar like thunder rang out in the far-off mountains, as if the gods had awakened from lifetimes of imprisonment under the ice and stone. They let out a horrible, frightening moan.

The sky was dark as night.

Suddenly, they could see flashes of figures around them. With tremendous difficulty, Zhao Yunlan kept his eyes open against the fierce wind and saw Wang Zheng—sixteen or seventeen years old, innocent, practically still a child—standing outside a crowd of people. A handsome young man in ragged clothes stood somewhere high up. As if sensing something, he turned back to look at her across a distance. When their eyes met, his blood-covered face broke into a smile that was almost pure.

Then he roared, swinging the huge metal shovel in his hands toward the large stone tablet on the sacrificial altar. The hills under his feet ran red with blood. Countless bodies lay below.

The crowd of survivors craned their necks to watch his every movement.

The man leveled the stone tablet. After a brief silence, he suddenly yelled something, voice gruff. Zhao Yunlan couldn't understand the words, but the spirit of them was plain. Blood and mud covered this man from head to toe. He had succeeded, but his face was full of anguish, not joy. A group of people who had been oppressed for millennia were tasting their first breath of freedom, and they nearly choked on their tears.

The silent crowd finally began responding to him. The valley echoed with the yelling and crying of men.

The illusion was suddenly gone. The Mountain-River Awl slowly started to rise from the ground.

The Soul-Executing Emissary extended another finger. "Soul of the Water!"

Zhao Yunlan stood stock-still. The absolute blackness of the Mountain-River Awl was reflected in his eyes, which were reddened by the north wind. He pressed against Clarity as if comforting the young girl's soul trapped inside, offering what consolation he could for the solitude from which she would never find peace.

A piercing outcry broke out. Zhao Yunlan's head jerked involuntarily, trying to evade it as a fresh wave of dizziness swamped him. The screams grew louder and closer together, overlapping in shrill misery. The sound gave him the feeling of being clawed apart inside.

Zhao Yunlan was about to be sick.

Then the Soul-Executing Emissary's robes emitted gray mist again, cutting the sound off completely. The Mountain-River Awl resumed its original appearance, slowly falling back into the position they'd found it in. Zhao Yunlan belatedly registered the fresh taste of blood; a quick touch confirmed that he'd bitten his tongue during the assault on his ears. "What *was* that?" he asked.

The Emissary's calm voice finally took on a note of worry. "I was too rash. That was the sound of tens of thousands of ghosts crying out in lamentation."

"What?"

"The girl said that Sangzan had razed the stone tablet atop the sacrificial altar. I thought his action would have released the innocent souls trapped within, so the number of resentful spirits still inside caught me off guard. The dead have no tears. A sound so vast must mean millions of innocent souls screaming at once, even if they risk being torn apart forever by doing so. It could level hundreds of thousands of snowy mountains, never mind you or me."

Zhao Yunlan stood behind him, hands behind his back, not speaking. The Emissary continued, “The Mountain-River Awl has been standing here for tens of thousands of years. It has seen too much.”

Suddenly, Clarity flashed. A white form emerged and made for the Mountain-River Awl at lightning speed. But before she made it even a meter—before she had even fully left the watch—a clear gossamer strand extended from Zhao Yunlan’s hand and bound Wang Zheng tightly in place.

She froze, then lowered her head. Ghost and living human gazed at each other. Wang Zheng’s eyes looked wet, but with her tears still sealed by his talisman, crying was beyond her ability. Zhao Yunlan’s face remained blank, not betraying a trace of sympathy.

“Run.” His voice held a glacial chill. “Let’s see if you can get away from me twice.” Wang Zheng looked down, afraid to meet his eyes.

“Guardian,” the Emissary said steadily, “there is no need to speak in anger.”

Out of respect for him, the glare Zhao Yunlan was directing at Wang Zheng eased slightly. “Do you think sacrificing yourself to the Mountain-River Awl can appease the resentment of tens of thousands of ghosts? Do you think sincerity can move mountains, or do you really think you’re that important? Are you a complete idiot?”

The long, thin red stitches encircling Wang Zheng’s neck were becoming more and more prominent. The paper talisman stuck to her forehead fluttered as she trembled. She looked every inch the zombie girl in a third-rate horror movie, but no one could laugh about the comical resemblance.

Having let off some steam, Zhao Yunlan felt better. He found a place on the ground to sit next to the Emissary, then gestured toward Wang Zheng with his chin. “Sit.” The gossamer thread binding her surged and transformed into a silver chair sized for a single person.

People belonging to ethnic minorities from bitterly cold regions often had a particular warm enthusiasm about them, but there was no trace of it in Wang Zheng; perhaps the story of her life and death was too long and cold to sustain it. Whatever the reason, she seemed perpetually gloomy and quiet, withdrawing into herself no matter the situation. Her jet-black hair cascaded down around her face, drifting in midair.

Calmer now, Zhao Yunlan said, “Sometimes a listener only needs to hear a bit of a story before they can guess the ending. Do you know why that is?”

Wang Zheng looked up without answering, and Zhao Yunlan sighed. “Because its ending is inevitable. And if something was destined to happen, there’s not a damn thing you alone could have done to prevent it.”

“How do you know?” Wang Zheng mumbled.

“I just understand people like Sangzan,” Zhao Yunlan said. “Hundreds of generations of slaves. When a father dies, the son still needs to serve. If Sangzan was the first one who ever dared to truly rebel, his heart must have been bursting with discontent. A courageous, upright, outstanding man like that? He might conceivably be willing to die for you if you wanted his life, but he’d never allow you to harm his dignity. Forget about empty things like titles or honors, or distant things like promotions or wealth. Isn’t a man’s most fundamental dignity found in taking care of

his family and in being able to keep the person deepest in his heart safe?"

From close by, the Emissary murmured, "Does that describe you as well, Guardian?"

"You can't force something like fate." Zhao Yunlan had no idea why the Emissary might interject with something so trivial. A bit taken aback, he answered, "If someone was willing to follow me to the ends of the earth, if they took care of me and understood me and my needs, but I didn't even have the heart to protect them? What the fuck would I even be? Would I even deserve to be called human?"

The Emissary's hands had been resting on his knees, but now he withdrew them into his sleeves where no one could see them clench them into fists. Softly, he said, "The Guardian's affections run deep. The one who receives them will be fortunate indeed."

"Huh?" The praise made Zhao Yunlan freeze, thrown off by the comment. Then he laughed it off. "Aiyou, my lord, please don't. I don't have the fortitude to be praised by you."

The Emissary changed the subject lightly rather than continuing with that line of thought. "For his people's sake, Sangzan bore the burden of such horrendous deeds. He gambled everything to give them a better life. But having personally made such an impossible dream come true, there was no way he could've imagined what would follow."

Zhao Yunlan nodded. "If I were in his shoes and the woman I loved died at those people's hands, under the rules I'd laid down, I would hate them even more than I'd hated the old chief."

"More than that…" The Soul-Executing Emissary looked up through his gray mist at the towering, unmoving Awl. "Even rending them limb from limb could never appease my hatred."

He spoke quietly, but the cold in his voice was bottomless. Wang Zheng felt it keenly. She shrank back behind Zhao Yunlan.

"Did they behead you in front of him?" Zhao Yunlan asked.

She shook her head. "They put him under house arrest. The girl's father said I had bewitched Sangzan and that it was all for his own good."

After a silence, Zhao Yunlan said, "Then was he the one who collected your body?" Wang Zheng nodded. "So when you said you wanted to come here to find your body and finally rest in peace, you were just lying to me?"

Wang Zheng looked down. Eventually, she nodded again.

Brow creased, Zhao Yunlan looked at her for some time. Finally he glanced away. "This is the last time," he said stiffly.

The Soul-Executing Emissary intervened. "Did Sangzan put your body in water?"

Wang Zheng inhaled deeply, taking a moment to calm herself. "Yes. Among our tribe, the mountain represents detainment and intimidation, while the water represents light that can float freely for miles. When slaves or criminals died, they were beheaded and sealed on the mountaintop. When nobles or highly respected people died, they were given a water burial and sent drifting down the river. Sangzan dug my head out in the night and stole my body before it could be burned. He cut the head off the body of that girl who'd died accidentally and swapped our bodies. He

took me down to the river and sewed my head and body together, then put me in the body bag that had been prepared for her. He held me and wept the entire night, and the next day he stood and watched as someone else put me in the river."

She raised her head minutely, lightly tracing the circle of red thread with her fingertips. The stitches were tight and fine. Rather than being creepy, the gesture was heartbreaking to see.

How must Sangzan have felt as he held her body and washed her face clean? As his fingers touched that pale, waxen face that held only death? As he sewed her body and head together?

Perhaps he had never even had the chance to tell her about the feelings he had always kept hidden, that had never seen the light.

Time was relentless and needlessly cruel. If someone hesitated even slightly, time would steal away their dearest desire and leave them with ashes, brokenhearted and unable to turn back the clock.

The two men listening were both silent, lost in thought.

"The water took my body away, but I never left," Wang Zheng said. "I kept watching over him. He became a different person. Voting in the tribe had always been conducted by three people who took turns. One was Sangzan, one was the person who led the charge to have me killed, and the third was a well-respected elder. They would bring up important issues, and everyone else would raise their hands to speak. After some time, Sangzan married the elder's granddaughter. The two of them joined forces against the man who killed me. Ultimately, they entrapped and framed him. Two years later, everyone voted to kill him too."

Zhao Yunlan took out another cigarette, held it under his nose, and took a small sniff.

"After another year passed, the respected elder also died. It was believed that he'd died of old age, but I saw Sangzan poison him." Wang Zheng's brows twitched as if even now she couldn't accept that fact. Poison was a coward's weapon. How had an upstanding hero turned into a weasel who could poison someone in secret?

By using this method, it was as if he'd been determined to shame the people he'd secretly killed, even if it meant dishonoring himself.

"Next it was his wife, his young son… His own flesh and blood." Wang Zheng's nearly transparent hands twisted in the folds of her equally nonexistent white dress. "Every time he killed someone, he would secretly cut off their head the day before they were supposed to go in the water. He would replace their head with a rock and bury their head on the mountain. The weight caused their bodies to sink to the bottom of the river, unable to float away. By that point, no one in the tribe could stand against him. His reputation was at its peak. After years of careful scheming, he was able to manipulate everyone so that they believed they were voting freely, when actually he was ensuring that they thought the way he wanted them to. Eventually, he became the new chief."

The new chief who held all the power yet wanted nothing but the tribe's destruction.

After that, there were power struggles between different factions. Sangzan would suppress or support them, and even secretly fan the flames between them. The boy who had once been so honest and brave had learned to be a conspirator all on his own. The boy who had once held the corpse of the person he loved and wept through

the night had turned into a cold-blooded, dangerous person…just as those good people who danced, sang, and only wanted to work hard for a better life would also raise their hands and blades to behead an innocent girl, then seal her soul into darkness and slavery for all eternity.

"In the fifteenth year after my death, the Hanga tribe once again descended into internal chaos. The slaves who had been suppressed for generations split into two factions and pointed weapons at their brethren. The battle was even crueler and fiercer than what had taken place before. They fought for an entire day and night. The valley was filled with the dead. Young children sat next to the bodies and wailed, faces smeared with blood. Vultures attracted by the scent of death circled overhead but didn't descend because…because Sangzan had led the rest of the people to the sacrificial altar, where he lit the oil he had buried there earlier. While the fire blazed around him, he lifted the stone slab he'd set upside down under the Mountain-River Awl."

Even more softly, Wang Zheng said, "That stone slab that had once represented eternal slavery, the one that had been scoured bare, once again had everyone's names carved into it. The enormous fire kept burning and burning, as if it wanted to consume the entire valley. Only the Mountain-River Awl remained—a cold, unmoving pillar of shame."

Those tens of thousands of ghosts had good reason to raise their voices in lamentation.

Chapter 25

"OKAY, I GET IT," Zhao Yunlan interrupted, dispassionate. "In other words, all the resentful spirits inside the Mountain-River Awl are tribesmen and followers that Sangzan killed. So enough about all that shit from thousands of years ago. What's our next move here and now?"

The Soul-Executing Emissary said nothing at first. Wang Zheng opened her mouth to speak, but Zhao Yunlan stabbed a finger at her. "Zip it. I wasn't asking you."

Wang Zheng zipped it.

"The Mountain-River Awl suppresses and absorbs souls," the Emissary said. "Even someone who died peacefully of old age and had their soul drawn into the Awl would eventually become a vicious, resentful spirit, let alone those who died in such bitter, violent ways. If you ask me, there is no other way. Either we destroy this Hallowed Artifact, or we forcibly suppress all the souls it contains."

The attempt at tact left Wang Zheng staring at him, wide-eyed with confusion. "My lord, what do you…"

Zhao Yunlan threw tact out the window. "He means if we can't blow up the Mountain-River Awl, the only option is to obliterate all the souls inside it. It's the only way to prevent further problems."

Wang Zheng covered her mouth with a hand.

The Emissary shook his head. "Executing a soul for no reason is unjust."

That left destroying the Mountain-River Awl.

All three of them fell silent.

Could the Netherworld's Hallowed Artifacts just be destroyed on a whim?

Zhao Yunlan sat on the ground, toying with his lighter. As he stared into the tiny flame, he suddenly remembered something. "On our way up here, we saw a reaper with a lantern on the highway outside of Qingxi Village. It wasn't that far away. Did they not know what was going on here? Did they just pass right by the Mountain-River Awl?"

The Emissary paused almost imperceptibly before answering. "They must ferry hundreds of people. Perhaps they lacked the time to deal with it."

The glance Zhao Yunlan gave him seemed dubious. "If I may ask, my lord, why did you wait until now to gather the Four Hallowed Artifacts? They've been lost in the Mortal Realm for so long. Stumbling onto the Reincarnation Dial was a coincidence, but this time, you came straight for the Mountain-River Awl, didn't you?"

Realizing he'd said too much, the Soul-Executing Emissary made no reply. Zhao Yunlan was far too astute. He showed a facade of being brash and unreliable, but that was a cover for his true shrewdness. Whenever he exposed his sharp mind without warning, he could cut right to the heart of an issue.

Zhao Yunlan wasn't about to let the Emissary off so easily. His gaze slowly lowered, coming to rest on the Soul-Executing Emissary's wide sleeves. "The blood

on my lord's sleeves is still wet. I'd never even heard of a youchu until recently, when they appeared at almost the exact same time as the Reincarnation Dial, one of the Four Hallowed Artifacts. The Netherworld had never breathed a word to me about them before. What exactly are youchu? Where did they come from? They can't have just appeared out of nowhere. And as for these so-called 'Hallowed Artifacts,' shouldn't everyone be fighting as hard as they can for them? Why would you guys let them drift around the Mortal Realm for all these years?"

The Emissary was accustomed to questioning others; he had never been on the receiving end like this. He was quiet for a long time. Finally, unable to offer a good excuse, he acted like a gentleman and offered the only truth he could. "Forgive me, but I cannot say."

Lying to someone like Zhao Yunlan was basically asking to be humiliated. It was much simpler to fall back on "I can't tell you," which took much less energy than lying.

Lighting another cigarette, Zhao Yunlan took a deep drag and stopped asking.

He stood up and took out the patch of wall with the octagon symbol on it. Holding it in his palm, he asked Wang Zheng, "What does this mean? To your people, does this symbolize the Mountain-River Awl?"

Wang Zheng examined it closely, then shook her head, "No. When I was small, my father taught me that this meant 'mountain.' When a circle surrounds it, it means a river surrounding a mountain."

"Are you sure your dad wasn't messing with you?" Zhao Yunlan asked. "Doesn't your illiterate tribe have another symbol for mountains?"

Wang Zheng was good tempered. Even when her boss said something so blatantly racist, she was able to stay calm; she didn't even daydream about beating him up. "Those are for normal mountains," she clarified. "The octagon is reserved for the sacred mountain—this one, where the Mountain-River Awl is. Before I died, this was my tribe's forbidden area. No one but the chief was allowed to come here."

Zhao Yunlan's brows furrowed. "But I didn't see any water around the mountain."

"After all this time, maybe the landscape has changed."

Zhao Yunlan gazed toward the Mountain-River Awl. "The souls of the mountain and water… The Hanga used the Mountain-River Awl for the Luobula Curse for who-knows-how-many generations. They must have had a deeper understanding of what's going on. Why does giving someone a water burial in the river enable them to escape the Mountain-River Awl?"

The Soul-Executing Emissary saw where he was going with that and gave it some thought. "The mountain does not move, and running water does not nurse decay. The Guardian is suggesting water can defeat it?"

"Why don't we try it and see?" Zhao Yunlan asked.

The Emissary stood up. Zhao Yunlan waved to Wang Zheng as if calling a dog, impatiently tapping his watch.

She understood. With a flash, she was gone.

The Emissary raised a hand and dispelled the mist, then immediately pointed at the ground. The circle of snow and ice surrounding the Mountain-River Awl quickly began to melt, becoming a thin ring of water. As anticipated, the Mountain-River

Awl's restless stirring quieted at once. It stood there in malicious silence, like a lunatic who had been temporarily appeased.

Standing cautiously outside the circle of water, the Emissary observed the Awl's reaction.

As more and more ice and snow melted, a bubbling stream formed. It spread through the heavy, accumulated snow like little snakes, hissing their way toward the Mountain-River Awl.

A faint whirring sound caught Zhao Yunlan's attention. For a moment, he thought it was tinnitus, but gradually, he began to make out intermittent words. A voice said, "Aged… Aged but not yet old…"

Zhao Yunlan went completely still. Something beyond words stirred in his heart. He listened carefully and found himself speaking in unison with the voice. "Stone that is aged but not yet old; water that is frozen but not yet cold; body that is dead but not yet born; soul that is melted but not yet burned…"

The Soul-Executing Emissary's head whipped around.

After a dazed moment, Zhao Yunlan came back to himself. He pinched the bridge of his nose forcefully, struck by the suspicion that he was hallucinating. For a second there, he'd felt sure that the Mountain-River Awl was forging some sort of connection with him, pulling him closer.

In that moment, when he looked at the ground, a white light reflected off the snow and into his eyes. Zhao Yunlan's pupils constricted at the sight of a person appearing out of nowhere behind the Soul-Executing Emissary. A huge axe came slashing straight down toward the back of the Emissary's head.

From the moment he'd entered the valley, Zhao Yunlan had kept one hand tucked in his pocket, holding his gun at the ready. Reacting instantaneously, he drew the gun, braced his wrist on the Emissary's shoulder, and fired without even blinking.

Through the silencer, the bullet hit the attacker square in the forehead. At the same time, the the Emissary swung the blade to the side. He turned like a vortex of night incarnate, a fierce gale rising around him. The friction of his blade and its sheath made an earsplitting sound as the end collided with the descending giant axe.

They both took three steps back. That was when Zhao Yunlan realized the axe-wielder's face was covered by a deathly pale ghost mask. Ink-black fluid was trickling from the bullet hole in his forehead.

The ghost-faced figure slowly raised his hand, wiped the black blood off, and turned to Zhao Yunlan. Following his movements, the mask's drawn-on features slowly twisted into something resembling a smile.

"Guardian." The voice was muffled beneath the mask. "It's been thousands of years, but you haven't changed a bit."

Zhao Yunlan arched an incredulous brow. That was rich, coming from someone he'd never heard of. And where did the "thousands of years" come from?

The mask's eyebrows suddenly turned downward, morphing into an expression that looked like it was torn between crying and laughter. The person touched the bloody hole in his forehead, exploring inside it. "The Guardian didn't quite disregard me like this before. But it doesn't matter. After all, the favor of lending a fire couldn't be repaid even if I died hundreds—"

The Emissary didn't let him continue. The Soul-Executing Blade narrowed into a sliver of piercing light, nearly whistling as it sliced through the air. Zhao Yunlan had never seen the Emissary in such a violent rage. Sensibly, he stepped aside in case the two clashing titans needed more space.

From his watch, Wang Zheng asked, "Director Zhao, who's that?"

Zhao Yunlan held a cigarette between his lips, stuffing each hand into the opposite sleeve to keep warm. He squatted down. "How should I know? I don't know everyone. Do I look like someone who just makes friends randomly?"

Wang Zheng didn't dignify that with a response.

Zhao Yunlan observed the battle for a while, then put out his cigarette in the snow. He exhaled into his frozen hands and rubbed them together.

"Stone that is aged but not yet old; water that is frozen but not yet cold…" As he spoke, his gaze shifted to the side. He knocked on his watch. "You know, I just had an idea. I'm going to try it out."

That was exactly what Wang Zheng was afraid of: Zhao Yunlan having ideas. "Director Zhao!" she cried out. "Director Zhao—!"

Zhao Yunlan ignored her and took a ring of keys from his belt. The old key chain had once looked like a book, but the designs on it had been rubbed smooth. On the back, "Guarding" was written crookedly. There was a split down the middle, like a locket that could be opened. Carrying it, he headed toward the Mountain-River Awl.

Suddenly, a group of youchu burst from the heaving ground. They surrounded him, watching with a predatory gaze.

Zhao Yunlan looked right back at them. Lazily drawing out his words, he said, "Oh, I think I get it now. He's the 'master,' hmm? And you're the ones who took the Reincarnation Dial. What are you planning on doing with the Four Hallowed Artifacts?"

The youchu didn't answer. They just took a step toward him, shoulder to shoulder, trying to scare him off.

Zhao Yunlan gave a cold laugh. With a cigarette between his fingers, he opened the little book-shaped keychain. A small ball of fire sprang up, revealing that the object was an intricate lighter, not a locket. With a small noise, Zhao Yunlan lit his cigarette.

He kept holding the lit cigarette rather than putting it in his mouth. "I hate two things," he said. "Ugly people doing evil things, and menacing mutts blocking the road. You guys truly are model soldiers of the new age—all you do is trigger other people's land mines."

Like a tiny firecracker, the cigarette flew from his hand with a whoosh. A heartbeat later, it flared into a tremendous fireball with a long tail, heading straight for the youchu like a meteor of destruction.

It was no ordinary fire. The youchu screamed pitifully as it closed in on them. "The True Flames of Samadhi!" Two of them, unable to dodge in time, were swallowed by the conflagration.

In the firelight, Zhao Yunlan's smile glowed. "Forget 'true flame' and 'fake flame'! Are you so uncultured that you don't even recognize the number one hidden weapon on the *Ranking of Weapons*? In the streets, people call this little wonder the

Monkey Fleeing to the Sky!”

As he said this, the dashingly named fireball headed straight for the Mountain-River Awl’s base.

Chapter 26

HEARING THE COMMOTION behind him, the Soul-Executing Emissary gave a fierce flick of his wrist, sending his blade toward the ghost-faced figure. When he took the opportunity to glance back, the light of the monstrous fireball all but blinded him, leaving him unable to locate Zhao Yunlan. In desperation, he yelled, "Yunlan!"

Rather than take advantage of the Emissary's distraction, the ghost-faced figure didn't try to evade the attack. On the contrary, he offered his face to the Soul-Executing Blade. The blade cut into his mask, but then the Emissary seemed to hesitate. His attention snapped back and he quickly withdrew, leaving the mask scored but intact. For some reason, he was reluctant to cut off his adversary's mask, and the two brushed past each other.

With an uproarious laugh, the ghost-faced figure headed straight for Zhao Yunlan like a huge cloud of black mist. Gathering his long cape, he drew the little cigarette lit with the True Flames of Samadhi into it. He stood facing Zhao Yunlan, his back to the Mountain-River Awl. The remaining youchu immediately retreated behind him, forming a ring around the Awl.

Zhao Yunlan regarded him with his eyes narrowed. "Bi Fang, that pheasant, swore up and down that the True Flames of Samadhi were enough to make the Monkey King cry for his parents, but your stupid robe isn't even singed. I'm impressed."

No expression showed on the ghost-faced mask. "I have no wish to hurt you. It would be best if the Guardian stayed out of this."

There was no change in Zhao Yunlan's relaxed, easy posture, with one hand tucked into a pocket. He didn't need to try hard for his streetwise attitude to shine through. "Aiyou, I'm so scared."

The Soul-Executing Emissary strode over and pushed Zhao Yunlan behind him, holding his blade at the ready. The way he'd positioned himself was so obviously protective that Zhao Yunlan shot him a confused look. Since the moment the peculiar ghost-faced person had appeared, there had been too many inconsistencies with the Emissary's behavior.

This was no time to puzzle over that, though. Zhao Yunlan rummaged through his pocket. "Judging by your reaction, I guess the legendary Mountain-River Awl really does fear fire—or no, the Awl is all about suppression. It collects souls and keeps them locked inside. My guess is that it fears *everything* that flows, including water, fire, and maybe even wind. It's just that wind, water, and fire from the Mortal Realm are all too weak, right?"

The frighteningly large eyes on the ghostly mask turned, staring straight at Zhao Yunlan. "Take care, Guardian. All that cleverness will get you hurt."

Ominously, the Emissary said, "If you dare touch even a strand of his hair, I will make you regret ever crawling out of that place."

The ghost-faced figure laughed loudly. "And how do you plan to do that?"

"Try me and find out," the Emissary replied.

The mask's features flickered. Its wearer suddenly launched up into the air, taking flight like a giant bat. Wide wings opened and he dove down, once again meeting the Emissary's blade.

While those two fought, Zhao Yunlan suddenly dashed away from them. Youchu burst up out of the ground and rushed him, and he shot them down one by one.

The ghost-faced figure gave chase, eyes flashing. Despite the slash to his back, he continued to pursue Zhao Yunlan recklessly. Black blood gushed from the resulting wound, but it didn't seem to matter.

More youchu were arriving by the moment. Zhao Yunlan swept a leg out and connected with a youchu's face, knocking the creature to the ground. He stepped on its shoulder, brandishing the whip that had appeared in his palm. With a flick of his wrist, he cracked the whip, aiming for the ghost-masked face coming up behind him.

For some reason, the Emissary was unwilling to let the face beneath the mask be exposed. Zhao Yunlan's sudden attack startled him enough that he instinctively raised his blade's sheath as if to block the whip. He managed to stop himself, if only barely.

The ghost-faced figure had no apparent fear of guns, but the whip was another matter. He sprang back seven or eight meters, retreating out of its range.

When Zhao Yunlan convulsed with sudden silent laughter, the ghost-faced man instantly realized something was wrong. He twisted his head back, but too late—with an earsplitting noise, a bolt of lightning fell from the dark, heavy sky, carrying destruction from the Nine Heavens. The youchu under the Mountain-River Awl were all consumed by its fury.

With a great boom, divine fire illuminated the entire Awl.

Zhao Yunlan let his hands fall open, revealing a lightning-invocation talisman that was already disintegrating into fine powder.

Heavenly smiting was the punishment that awaited all traitors, evildoers, defilers, and sinners. Since youchu were unclean by nature, they were twice as efficient at attracting lightning.

Zhao Yunlan dusted the powder off his hands. "Don't try to act cool. Acting cool gets you struck by lightning."

His words still hung in the air when the Mountain-River Awl started to melt like a glacier. It slowly became thinner and smaller. The huge fire resulting from the divine lightning blazed straight toward the sky, reaching several hundred meters up. It echoed with the muffled sound of thunder, forming a maelstrom of flame at the Awl's base. Anyone who even approached would be seared.

Countless lost, blurry faces flickered within the flames and vanished as if the divine fire had sent them elsewhere. A shaking like a heartbeat arose from the depths of the earth, like Zhao Yunlan had genuinely startled the souls of the mountain and water.

Suddenly, the ghost-faced figure appeared right in front of Zhao Yunlan, axe already falling toward him. Fortunately, the Emissary wasn't paying any attention to the ruined Hallowed Artifact. The Soul-Executing Blade swept sideways with tremendous force. A clang split the air as it met the edge of the axe.

But Zhao Yunlan hadn't been the target at all. When the Emissary stopped him, the ghost-faced man rolled with it and stayed close. With a creepy smile, he spoke into the Emissary's ear. "He fucked up my plans. Are you happy? I'm sure he's guessed far more than he lets on. He just won't say it in front of you."

A tiny motion of the Emissary's wrist set his blade vibrating wildly. It sheared cleanly through one of his adversary's arms, but for all the ghost-faced man's response, it might have only cut a sleeve.

One-armed now, the ghost-faced figure backed up several dozen meters faster than the eye could see. The youchu that had managed to survive followed him, crawling and rolling along the ground. The bloodstained hem of his robe fluttered in the air. He whistled sharply, then called, "Good luck!"

They vanished as they had arrived: without a trace.

The Emissary looked at Zhao Yunlan's profile, at how the firelight shone on his face, and felt a wave of panic. What was "he's guessed far more than he lets on" supposed to mean?

What exactly had Zhao Yunlan guessed?

Just then, Zhao Yunlan turned to him. "My lord, can I trouble you to block the light with your sleeves again?"

The familiar gray mist rose back up immediately. Zhao Yunlan looked down and let Wang Zheng out of his watch, then pulled out a wrinkled soul-tracking talisman. "Call out to Sangzan. Let me see if I can summon his soul." Wang Zheng's eyes went wide. "Hurry! Before the fire goes out!"

Wang Zheng floated up into the air, facing the Mountain-River Awl, and yelled something Zhao Yunlan didn't understand. The talisman he held shattered at once, turning into a tiny breeze that gently caught Wang Zheng's words and swept them into the burning Awl.

Wang Zheng couldn't venture past the mist, but she held herself as close to its border as possible, watching anxiously.

As the Mountain-River Awl dwindled, so did the fire—and with it, the light in Wang Zheng's eyes. But then, as the divine fire was about to burn down to nothing, the blurry shadow of a man appeared in the flames. He seemed to be watching them from the distance.

Wang Zheng covered her mouth.

Zhao Yunlan took out a Soul-Guarding Order and snapped his fingers. It levitated to float in midair, standing upright. He turned to Wang Zheng. "You go talk to him. If he's willing, tell him to walk toward the Soul-Guarding Order himself."

His instructions proved unnecessary. The moment Sangzan saw Wang Zheng, he froze. Then he raced wildly out of the divine fire and straight toward the Soul-Guarding Order, all without a sound. The two spirits flashed in unison and vanished into the Soul-Guarding Order, which then disappeared into Zhao Yunlan's watch.

It was a long time before the huge blaze finally died down entirely, leaving behind nothing but the worn-down sacrificial altar. The Mountain-River Awl had disappeared without a trace.

Zhao Yunlan slowly made his way to the spot. After some digging around, he found a small octagonal stone. It was wedge shaped—wide at the top and narrow at

the bottom. Plucking it from the ground, he threw it to the Soul-Executing Emissary. "Here! Your Hallowed Artifact."

The Emissary snatched the unimpressive-looking stone from the air. First, he carefully looked it over, and then he put it to his ear and listened. Thin, howling cries came from within, faint and full of desolation.

Wang Zheng spoke up from the watch, her voice full of hope. "Have… Have they all been freed?"

"No," the Emissary said. "They are still inside. The essence of mountains and rivers has no fear of fire. The Guardian said it fears everything that flows, but that fear belongs to the souls and power it had drawn in from the Mortal Realm and built up around itself. That is what was burned away. This is its true form."

Zhao Yunlan laughed. "Yeah, I just said that to fool him. Did he really think I was going to split the Mountain-River Awl? I've noticed that people who go around wearing masks don't tend to be very smart."

"…"

"Ah—that doesn't include *you*, my lord," Zhao Yunlan added, making it worse. "Of course not."

The Soul-Executing Emissary was perfectly aware that Zhao Yunlan was unhappy about his many secrets. The fearless piece of shit was blatantly insulting him while claiming not to. He wasn't sure whether he wanted to laugh or cry, but one thing was clear: Zhao Yunlan had almost certainly overheard the last thing his ghost-faced adversary had said, and he was now making some extremely calculated jabs as a result.

On the one hand, it gave him the sense that their relationship was becoming more casual and familiar; on the other, Zhao Yunlan was subtly conveying that he wouldn't make wild guesses just because of a few overheard words.

The Emissary's heart sank. The man really was incredibly astute. It was likely that he wouldn't be able to hide the truth from him for much longer.

Wang Zheng made a surprised noise. Anxiously, she asked, "Then how do we let them out? How can we help them find peace?"

"Since my lord has removed the Mountain-River Awl, the Yin-Gathering Spell on the mountaintop is now also broken. Once the trapped souls think it through, they'll come out on their own. They're only still stuck in there because they don't want to come out yet. What can keep them in there now other than themselves?" Zhao Yunlan paused, then said pointedly, "When it comes down to it, wasn't everything that happened all those years ago because people felt wronged?"

Wang Zheng suddenly went quiet.

Noticing that Clarity was running again, Zhao Yunlan took out his phone, checked the time, and reset the time on the watch. "Isn't that true of you too, silly girl?"

"I was wrong," she mumbled.

"You sure were," Zhao Yunlan said easily. "Once you get back, write me a thirty thousand word report, and don't think you'll be getting any bonuses for the next six months. Reflect carefully, Comrade Wang Zheng. You'll be representing our department at the Party seminar at the end of this year. I'll get Zhu Hong to find you a corpse to wear, so study hard."

Wang Zheng was silent for a while. Finally, she said softly, “So right from the start, I was powerless to do anything about all this?”

“Just realizing that now, you dumbass?” Zhao Yunlan suddenly laughed and pulled the ripped-out page about the Luobula Curse from his ratty wallet. He dug a hole and buried it deep under the snow. “There are always things that you can’t control. Either you become strong enough to solve every problem, or you just forget it. It’s not good to obsess over them. That just eats up your mental RAM.”

This time, Wang Zheng was silent for even longer.

The Soul-Executing Emissary approached and extended a hand to him. “We should leave. I will take the Guardian to the mountain pass, where the land is level.”

Zhao Yunlan was utterly exhausted. If someone was willing to give him a ride, of course he wasn’t going to walk. Nonchalantly, he let the Emissary take his hand.

The Emissary yanked him in close. Everything went dark. Before Zhao Yunlan could catch his balance and open his eyes, they had already teleported. The Emissary’s cape opened, revealing that they were at the mountain pass.

Releasing Zhao Yunlan, the Emissary backed up a step, bowed respectfully, and turned away. Between one heartbeat and the next, he vanished into a huge black hole.

As the Emissary disappeared, Zhao Yunlan rubbed his chin, deep in thought. Wang Zheng, still within his watch, suddenly spoke up. “I haven’t thanked you yet,” she began.

Zhao Yunlan cursed and rapped on the watch. “Don’t think sweet talk will get you out of those thirty thousand words. I expect that report in my inbox next week. And when we stay up to greet the New Year, all of you who had to write reports this year will have to read them out loud as part of our longstanding tradition. Don’t think you can get out of that either.”

Chapter 27

IT WAS EVENING by the time Zhao Yunlan strolled back to the little hut on the mountain. Zhu Hong shot him a questioning look; Zhao Yunlan replied by flashing his watch at her. She understood at once and took a little handmade yarn doll from her bag. Passing casually behind Zhao Yunlan, she rubbed the doll over his watch. Where no one could see, two wisps of white smoke flitted into the tiny doll. It suddenly came to life, moving slightly in her palm.

Zhao Yunlan assessed the room. Everyone was accounted for and seemed to be in good shape. Chu Shuzhi stood guard by the door, not moving a muscle. Daqing was lying by his feet. Guo Changcheng was taking care of whatever was boiling in the little pot. The students were sitting in a circle, clearly on edge as they listened to Lin Jing, that fake monk, tell a ghost story. And Shen Wei was…

Where was Shen Wei?

Wait—how could he have thought everyone was accounted for?

Zhao Yunlan's expression darkened. "Shen-laoshi?" he asked Zhu Hong.

She froze, a strangely lost look crossing her face. Then someone spoke up mildly from behind Zhao Yunlan. "Are you looking for me?" He turned to see Shen Wei walking in, arms full of firewood.

Zhu Hong slapped her forehead, as if just remembering. "Right! Yes! Since we'll be here another night, Shen-laoshi was worried we wouldn't have enough fuel. He went out to find dry kindling."

Shen Wei set the wood down by the fire to dry. "It's best to be prepared. Did you find Miss Wang?"

Zhao Yunlan glanced at him, confused. "Mm-hmm, I found her. We happened to run into the rescue squad on our way here. I have some things I need her to take care of, so they took her back for me."

"Oh." Shen Wei gave him a gentle smile. "As long as she's all right. You've been running around outside all day. Come drink some banlangen[38] so you don't catch a cold."

Zhao Yunlan stared at him for a while, then accepted the medicine as if nothing were out of the ordinary. He drank it down in one gulp. In the end, he didn't say anything.

Over the past few days, Zhao Yunlan had gotten drunk with Lang-ge, then driven through the snow for an entire day and not slept at all during the second half of the night. Then he'd been drugged by Wang Zheng and injured by the Mountain-River Awl, on top of trekking around in the snow all day at a high altitude. He'd even ended up fighting a bunch of monsters.

The result of all those intense activities caught up with him the next morning when he got up and found he had a crick in his neck.

Cricked neck or no cricked neck, he was still the boss. The moment he woke up, he started issuing orders. Bright and early in the morning, the small hut on the

mountain was in chaos under his direction. Zhao Yunlan ordered Lin Jing to massage his shoulder, at which point Lin Jing showed off the Shaolin sect's Strongman's Fingers and nearly broke his boss's neck. The pain practically made Zhao Yunlan cry and definitely made him suspect Lin Jing of doing it deliberately to get back at him. Rather than doing anything actually helpful, the pair of them chased each other around the hut for twenty minutes, only stopping when Zhu Hong ran out of patience and yelled at them.

Zhao Yunlan gave Lin Jing a few fierce punches, then realized that he could miraculously move his neck again. Clasping his hands behind his back, he strode inside to gather his things. As he passed by, he even grabbed Daqing and wrapped the cat around his neck like a scarf.

The class leader was thoroughly confused. "When did this cat get here? Is it going back with us? I thought it was a feral cat."

Snarkily, Zhao Yunlan replied, "Have you ever seen a feral cat this plump?"

Daqing gave him a decisive smack.

She walked over, full of sympathy, and petted Daqing's sleek, glossy fur. "Poor guy, being shipped all this way by air! Oh, right—Zhao-dage, our teacher said he'll drive on the way back so you can get some rest."

Zhao Yunlan pressed a hand to his cheek where the cat had smacked him and stopped in his tracks to look at Shen Wei, who happened to be looking back at him. When their eyes met, Shen Wei looked down with a soft smile. His expressions and language were always so reserved; to Zhao Yunlan, it seemed like every single look on Shen Wei's face concealed thousands of words.

His heart skipped a beat as he thought about the look in Shen Wei's eyes the night before, when he'd awakened to find the professor watching him. It made him feel as if someone had pinched the tip of his heart, leaving it feeling tender in more ways than one.

Zhao Yunlan spent the drive down the mountain asleep in the passenger seat. When his cell phone suddenly rang and woke him, it was already noon and the sun had started to move westward. The car had long since left the snowy regions, and from time to time they passed people's homes on the roadside.

It was Lang-ge calling. As soon as he heard that they were on their way back, he arranged a place for them to stay. Once again, he was overflowing with enthusiasm. He even expressed that they hadn't enjoyed themselves enough the last time. This time, he said, they'd just have to drink until they dropped.

Zhao Yunlan's expression was ugly when he hung up. He was neither an alcoholic nor Superman. What he wanted most right now was to sleep in a bed until the world ended, instead of having to grit his teeth and call a chubby man "bro" while they poured booze down each other's throats and spouted bullshit.

The sudden terrible news completely tanked his mood. Even teasing Shen Wei lost its appeal. Putting his phone away, he settled in to shut his eyes for as long as possible and try for a good nap before the tough battle awaiting him that night.

Shen Wei waited until Zhao Yunlan's breathing was slow and even before adjusting the blanket covering him.

By the time Lang-ge welcomed them on the main street downtown, Zhao Yunlan seemed to have shaken off his listlessness. He was once again a lively man, full of vim and vigor. Together, he and Lang-ge were poster boys for the saying "A thousand shots are not enough for chatty lips, and holes through stomachs are not enough for alcoholics."

But the truth was, Zhao Yunlan wasn't feeling well. When they cracked open the sixth bottle of liquor, he was already turning pale, despite looking unconcerned and pressing ahead through sheer willpower.

Lang-ge's tongue was twice its usual size, and his face was red as he directed the waiter to "Fill it up, fill it up!"

Unable to stop him, all Zhao Yunlan could do was go along with it as he nodded at the waiter. He smiled bitterly and went to pick up his cup.

Out of nowhere, Shen Wei, who had been observing in silence, suddenly grabbed his hand. Lang-ge and Zhao Yunlan were both taken by surprise.

Shen Wei raised Zhao Yunlan's glass and stood up. Very courteously, he said, "Director Zhao caught a bit of a cold in the mountains. He isn't feeling very well right now."

Zhao Yunlan hadn't expected salvation to appear from that quarter. He quickly played along, lowering his head and coughing a few times.

With a smile, Shen Wei continued, "Mr. Lang has taken such incredible care of us all this time, but unfortunately these are all poor students who haven't earned a cent in academia. We truly have no way to repay you. This drink is out of gratitude."

He clinked his glass with Lang-ge's and emptied it in one swallow.

Lang-ge paused. "Aiya," he exclaimed, a little surprised. It was one thing to call a thug like Zhao Yunlan "bro"; arrogant scholarly types were quite another matter. He fully expected them to look down on him, so he tried not to bother them if he could. He'd certainly never imagined that Shen Wei would pay him such respect.

It was a new milestone in Lang-ge's social-drinking career. Without a word, he dizzily took aim at Shen Wei too.

Zhao Yunlan quickly took a look around the table. The fake monk, who had excused himself by saying "monks don't drink alcohol," was currently reciting a Buddhist scripture as he gnawed on a huge bone. Zhu Hong was pretending to be an elegant lady who abstained from alcohol and was contently eating by herself, not even looking up. Chu Shuzhi had only touched his glass to his lips before pretending to be dead to the world.

And Guo Changcheng…that honest kid knew to fight for his boss, so he'd drunk himself unconscious ages ago. He was probably *genuinely* dead to the world.

All in all, not a single one of these traitors present could step up and help him.

Zhao Yunlan ground his teeth together and made a mental note about all of them. Then he drew on his charm and his capacity for drinking. Working together, he and Shen Wei drank Lang-ge, whose enthusiasm had caused such chaos, under the table. They were free at last.

Shen Wei clearly wasn't used to this kind of gathering. His cheeks had been red for quite some time, and his gaze was a little hazy. When he tried to stand up, he couldn't find his balance and plopped back into his seat. Zhao Yunlan hurried to help

him. Leaning close, he asked, “Are you all right?”

Shen Wei swayed. He didn’t reply, but he did take the opportunity to wrap his arms tight around Zhao Yunlan’s waist.

Zhao Yunlan’s heart fluttered. No, Shen Wei clearly wasn’t quite all right.

“Then I…” Zhao Yunlan licked his lips lightly and lowered his voice. With thoroughly indecent ideas running through his mind, he said, “I’ll, ah, help you back to your room?”

He took Shen Wei’s lack of response for tacit agreement. Ducking under Shen Wei’s arm to support him, Zhao Yunlan half guided and half pulled him upright. The good news was that Shen Wei wasn’t a rude drunk. Even thoroughly intoxicated, he was quiet and biddable rather than behaving wildly.

Zhao Yunlan forced himself awake and briefly said his goodbyes. Then, still supporting Shen Wei, he swiped open the room beside his own. He eased Shen Wei down on the edge of the bed and had him sit upright. Looking at Shen-laoshi’s dazed, blank face, he couldn’t resist tousling his hair. “If you’re this terrible at holding your liquor, why did you drink for me?”

Shen Wei only looked up, tracking his movements with unblinking eyes.

“Stay put. I’ll find you a towel to wipe your face.” Zhao Yunlan went into the bathroom and grabbed the towels provided by the hotel. He dampened one with cold water and another with hot water. As he turned around to take them to the drunkard, he had a bit of a shock. Shen Wei had gotten up and appeared behind him without making a sound and was now leaning against the door, staring straight at him in absolute silence.

The intensity of Shen Wei’s gaze was so heavy it was almost palpable.

Zhao Yunlan extended a towel toward him. “Here.”

Shen Wei’s reactions were slightly delayed. It took a moment before he slowly raised a hand, and then, instead of taking the towel, he reached right past it and took hold of Zhao Yunlan’s wrist instead. Zhao Yunlan found himself being dragged into Shen Wei’s arms by brute force.

He had noticed earlier that something wasn’t quite right with Shen Wei, and the mood was a bit off, but Zhao Yunlan was still delighted by this development. He offered no resistance when Shen Wei yanked him close, or when Shen Wei pushed him up against the wall roughly and found his mouth, nearly tearing at his lips.

Even the sudden tang of blood only heightened Zhao Yunlan’s excitement. He lazily slipped his arms around Shen Wei, his nimble fingers following and then reaching under the hem of Shen Wei’s shirt. He teasingly stroked Shen Wei’s back, noticing that the skin he was caressing was unusually cool, like soft jade… Except this particular “soft jade” was violently tearing at Zhao Yunlan’s clothes.

Zhao Yunlan tilted his head back indulgently. Shen Wei could tear whatever he wanted; meanwhile, Zhao Yunlan’s hand was traveling lower. He slid it down the back of Shen Wei’s pants and started to explore underneath. But before he managed to start touching in earnest, he found himself picked up by the waist. He was totally unprepared for his feet to leave the floor entirely or to be spun around in midair…or to fall backward as Shen Wei slammed him into the bed.

The bed creaked in protest at this treatment. Fortunately, the hotel’s pillows and bedding were thick enough that the impact didn’t hurt, but Zhao Yunlan yelped, half

in earnest. He dabbed at the blood on his lips and gave a faint laugh. “Babe, you’re a little wild.”

Shen Wei stared down at him. There was a sense of command in that look and an emotion in his night-black eyes that seemed barely contained. A hint of red highlighted his face. In the dim light, he was more beautiful than ever, rendering Zhao Yunlan suddenly breathless.

He reached up and took off Shen Wei’s glasses, then sat partway up and drew Shen Wei into his arms. Tugging Shen Wei’s collar open, he slid his hands downward, undoing buttons as he went. His fingers left trails of fire in their wake, revealing a body that was pale but not at all delicate.

Zhao Yunlan’s eyes darkened. He lowered his head and gave Shen Wei’s chest leisurely kisses. Voice a bit muffled, he said, “I was planning to keep my hands to myself, but then you went and threw yourself at me.”

He’d barely gotten the words out when Shen Wei abruptly grabbed his shoulder and pushed him back down on the mattress. The grip on Zhao Yunlan’s wrist tightened painfully as his hand was pressed into the pillow…and then Shen Wei’s teeth closed on his throat.

Lying under his weight, Zhao Yunlan felt Shen Wei's breathing grow harsher and harsher, as if he wanted to swallow Zhao Yunlan whole.

Shen Wei's sheer eagerness had caught him off guard, and the biting wasn't entirely comfortable. Zhao Yunlan struggled a little, unable to keep a small laugh from escaping. "Come on, babe, there's no rush. You…"

His slight movement seemed to unleash something. Shen Wei's manhandling had been a bit rough, but now it took on a certain madness. Shen Wei reached down and grabbed the arm Zhao Yunlan was resisting with, violently twisting it behind his back. A hand closed on Zhao Yunlan's neck, as if Shen Wei wanted to choke him to death.

Zhao Yunlan's aging bones creaked as his head was forced up. Before he could even protest, icy fingers seized his chin. Shen Wei leaned closer and kissed him—again and again and again, ravaging and plundering.

Suddenly, the lights went out with a pop, plunging the room into darkness. The only sound was a man panting like a wolf that had known only starvation for many, many years.

Something abruptly slashed across Zhao Yunlan's shirt, which hadn't had many buttons to begin with.

"Nnh… This is a little *too* wild… Shen Wei!" Zhao Yunlan's heart might have been alight and burning, but this kind of drunken craze wasn't what he had in mind. He deftly rolled to the side, shouldering Shen Wei and pulling his arm free.

As soon as Zhao Yunlan protested, Shen Wei froze. Then, without a word, he toppled into Zhao Yunlan's arms and went utterly still.

The lights in the room all came back on at once. The sudden glare was blinding. Eyes closed against it, Zhao Yunlan moved his wrenched shoulder and caught hold of Shen Wei. Nearly every trace of his earlier excitement was gone. With a bitter laugh, he said, "When you get drunk and cut loose, you really…"

He cut himself off mid-sentence, shocked into sobriety. All the alcohol in his system evaporated from his pores. In the stillness of the room, he couldn't hear Shen Wei's breathing!

Zhao Yunlan's hand trembled. He slowly pressed it to Shen Wei's neck and counted off thirty whole seconds. There was no pulse.

Shen Wei's face still had a red hue to it, but every sign indicated that he was now a corpse.

"Shen Wei? Shen Wei!" Zhao Yunlan turned him over and slapped his face hard. When that elicited no reaction at all, Zhao Yunlan immediately pressed on his chest and did a few rounds of CPR.

There was still no reaction. The body lying on the bed could have been a mannequin.

"Fuck!" Zhao Yunlan jumped up and retrieved his phone from where he'd dropped it. Its battery had fallen out, so he quickly stuffed it back in, turned the phone on, dialed the emergency number, and briefly explained the situation. Then, following the doctor's instructions, he tore through Shen Wei's luggage, hoping to find medication in case Shen Wei had a chronic illness of some kind.

While ransacking Shen Wei's things, Zhao Yunlan suddenly took conscious note of his own torn shirt.

The tear was a long diagonal slit from his left shoulder down to the right side of his abdomen. The shirt was heavy and made for the cold weather. Despite that, it had been tidily sliced in two, against the grain of the fabric. Zhao Yunlan closed one hand over each side and scrunched the shirt together. It had unmistakably been made by a sharp object.

But…drunk or not, Shen Wei's hands were empty. He didn't even have a nail clipper on him. Where had the sharp object come from?

Zhao Yunlan hadn't been all *that* drunk to begin with, and just now he'd been in a complete panic, but his brain was finally coming back online. No one's breathing and pulse would stop simultaneously without any warning signs. Even a sudden heart attack would have some other indicators. And yet Shen Wei had simply…shut off, just like the room's lights, as if he also had a switch.

All told, this didn't seem much like an illness. It was more like his soul had simply left his body.

Shocked and confused, Zhao Yunlan looked back at the man on the bed. After a moment of hesitation, he pulled a black leather notebook from his laptop bag. He took a yellow paper talisman from between the book's pages, then took a strand of Shen Wei's hair, rolled it up in the talisman, and lit the talisman on top of the notebook. Thin ashes fell into the book and swirled into nothingness, like salt falling into water.

A line of text appeared on the yellowing paper: *Great evil. A soulless being.*

Zhao Yunlan's expression shifted. Pressing between the pages, he quietly asked, "Where is he from?"

The words on the paper flashed, then disappeared. This time, it took longer for text to appear: *An unspeakable place, thousands of chi below the Huangquan.*

Zhao Yunlan's pupils constricted.

Then, he got up and tidied the room silently. Somehow, he found a handful of safety pins and pinned the tattered remains of his shirt closed from the inside, then shrugged back into the jacket he'd taken off because it stank of alcohol.

Very soon after that, the ambulance arrived. That woke everyone up, and after another round of chaos, Shen Wei was finally carried out.

The students were all panicked and at a loss for what to do, having lost their pillar of support. Zhao Yunlan overrode them all and made them stay put. He exchanged a glance with Lin Jing and got into the ambulance with Shen Wei.

Shen Wei's heart continued not to respond despite the doctors' frantic attempts to snatch his life from the jaws of death. Zhao Yunlan waited off to the side, tapping his thumb silently against the knuckle of his forefinger.

At this point, he knew there probably wasn't anything wrong with Shen Wei at all. The most likely scenario was that whoever was possessing the body had gotten drunk and was temporarily out of it, or the soul had straight up left. That would explain the terrifying symptoms.

And if that was the case…

Zhao Yunlan smoothed a crumpled invocation talisman behind his back. It lit in his palm. Then he lit a second, and then a third, but Shen Wei still didn't react.

Time crawled by. The doctors were on the verge of giving up.

Zhao Yunlan concentrated and lit a fourth talisman, chanting in his mind: *"Wandering soul, heed my call."*

With the third repetition, the talisman, which had nearly burnt out, flared with a whoosh. Shen Wei's corpse-like body suddenly jolted fiercely from the electric shock. "There's a pulse!" someone yelled. "We've got a pulse!"

Zhao Yunlan exhaled slowly, then calmly cupped all the ashes in his palm and hid them in his pocket.

Shen Wei had reached the hospital by ambulance in the middle of the night. A number of tests were conducted on him with no apparent results. Zhao Yunlan had called the ambulance because all the booze had shut his brain off, and this huge ruckus had ensued. All he could do now was stay with Shen Wei, shivering in the depths of winter.

Even Lang-ge was taken by surprise—he'd certainly never imagined he could drink someone into the hospital. Badly frightened, he raced to the hospital, but Zhao Yunlan managed to convince him to go back home. Fear had turned Lang-ge's face the color of a cucumber.

The next day, Shen Wei woke up to find tubes of all sorts attached to him. With no idea when or where he was, he froze, then sat up and started removing the array of things that were connected to him.

"I'm afraid you'll have to stay for a few days of observation," said a voice, and Shen Wei finally registered Zhao Yunlan sitting in the corner. Zhao Yunlan was bundled up in a large army coat and held a steaming cup in his hands. The steam hid his face just enough that Shen Wei couldn't see his expression clearly.

"I'm at the hospital?" Shen Wei was perfectly still, and then his expression changed as he seemed to realize something. "I… Did I drink too much?"

"That's an understatement," said Zhao Yunlan. "You drank so much that your breathing and pulse both stopped."

Shen Wei's heart sank. He didn't think that his alcohol tolerance was so low. As he fumbled desperately for an excuse, Zhao Yunlan set his cup aside lightly and said, "But really, this is my fault. I was dazed from the alcohol too and you scared me, so I didn't realize what was going on. I just panicked and called the emergency number. You might have to cooperate with the hospital for a few days…"

He paused before finishing his sentence. Shen Wei had a sinking suspicion.

"…my lord Emissary."

Chapter 28

FOR A WHILE, Shen Wei didn't make a single sound. Zhao Yunlan didn't rush him. He just sat motionless in the corner, waiting. The room was so quiet that the sound of Clarity ticking was faintly audible.

Eventually, Shen Wei sighed. With a wave, he banished the hospital gown and replaced it with his vast black robe. The Soul-Executing Blade was suddenly *there* in his hand. He secured the unremarkable-seeming blade at his waist. But for the first time, he didn't conceal his face.

"How did you know?"

Zhao Yunlan just looked at him, seeming thoughtful. When he finally opened his mouth, what came out was, "I didn't. I was bluffing."

The expression that spread across Shen Wei's face defied description.

Zhao Yunlan laughed. "No, no, it wasn't a complete guess. There were a few clues, like how your little messenger puppet showed up practically the second I stepped into the Hanga tribe's cave. When I mentioned encountering the reaper with the lantern up on the mountain, I didn't say what they were doing, but when you replied, you said that they'd been ferrying souls. I couldn't help remembering that the reaper bowed *twice* to the car before continuing on their way. I didn't think I was mistaken about that. And oh, right—when I got back to the hut, I asked Zhu Hong where you'd gone, and she went completely blank. It was like she completely forgot your existence until you were in front of her. And also…"

Also, there was the way you gazed at me that whole night in the hut.

Zhao Yunlan took a moment to swallow those words back down. His tone changed. "Also, when you stopped breathing like that and I couldn't find a pulse, I consulted the *Book of Life and Death* about you. It told me 'Shen Wei' was a soulless being who came from an unspeakable place."

"Evidently I was careless," Shen Wei said. A heavy silence fell between them.

To Zhao Yunlan, it felt excruciatingly awkward, especially when he remembered the horny way he'd followed "Shen Wei" around. The idea of keeling over and developing amnesia had a certain appeal.

"Um." He gave a dry cough. "Shen-laoshi. It never occurred to me that you were… That is, if I messed around too much, or was too forward, my apologies. Please don't take it too seriously, my lord."

Shen Wei shook his head wordlessly.

The awkwardness was unbearable. Still wearing his jacket, Zhao Yunlan lay down on the cot provided for patients' families. It was short and narrow, sized for a single person. He had to curl up slightly to fit on it, which was a pitiful look. But even while lying there pathetically, he remembered to say, "It's late, so you should get some rest. If you need anything, just say the word."

Shen Wei made a noise of acknowledgment.

Zhao Yunlan immediately regretted saying it; it wasn't as if Shen Wei was actually a patient. Feeling that everything that had come out of his mouth all day had

been wrong, Zhao Yunlan shut up, rolled onto his side, closed his eyes, and dozed.

But…all that aside, if Shen Wei was the Soul-Executing Emissary, how had he felt with Zhao Yunlan constantly at his side? What kind of gaze had been behind the black mist that shrouded his past and his future, as well as his face?

It was bound to be a sleepless night.

Director Zhao of the Special Investigations Department was suddenly on his best behavior.

He stopped spending time messing around or running his mouth with chubby Lang-ge. He stopped taking every opportunity to tease Shen-laoshi. When his team asked to go to the night market on the department's dime, Director Zhao waved his hand and allowed it. He didn't curse at anyone or show any intention of joining them.

Shen Wei stayed at the hospital for "further observation." Zhao Yunlan spent the time curled up on the room's narrow cot, surfing the internet and doing a bunch of weird research on his tablet.

Zhao Yunlan had vaguely indicated to Shen Wei that he should "cooperate" with the hospital. How exactly Shen Wei cooperated was unclear, but one way or another, after two days he was diagnosed with a severe allergy to alcohol that had paralyzed his heart. When Lang-ge, who was taking them to the airport, heard about this, he stomped his feet and pounded his chest with regret. Tugging at Shen Wei's hand, he cried, "Bro, if your laoge knew you couldn't drink, I never would have let you have a single sip!"

When Zhao Yunlan contemplated just whose "laoge" Lang-ge was claiming to be, his eyelid developed a tic. He grabbed Shen Wei's luggage and said, "Time to go through security."

Shen Wei quickly turned. "I can take my own bags."

Without replying, Zhao Yunlan jumped to the side and continued on with Shen Wei's luggage.

The idle brats of the Special Investigation Department, with Lin Jing as ringleader, all started to cough meaningfully. As if afraid there wasn't enough chaos in the world, they began making faces at each other.

Zhu Hong elbowed Guo Changcheng. "Hey, xiao-Guo, do you have a partner?"

Guo Changcheng blushed and shook his head.

Zhu Hong stared significantly at Zhao Yunlan's back. "If you want to find a partner in the future, you could learn a lot from our boss. Following his example will definitely make you the most eligible bachelor of the new era. But just remember, if you want a relationship that lasts, you need to make sure you learn from him selectively. He starts off strong, but once things get going, his behavior isn't worth imitating."

Still blushing, Guo Changcheng had the vague sense that Zhu Hong-jie was cursing their boss in broad daylight.

Zhao Yunlan turned and glared at them, which just made Lin Jing and Chu Shuzhi laugh even harder.

On the flight over, Zhao Yunlan had troubled a flight attendant specifically to switch his seat. The whole trip, he'd followed Shen Wei like a mosquito,

embarrassing himself nonstop in front of him. Now that they were heading back, Zhao Yunlan really wasn't in the mood…except when he got to his seat, he realized that Lin Jing, who had been in charge of the tickets, had helpfully put him and Shen Wei beside each other in seats far away from everyone else.

Lin Jing helped him stow his luggage and took the opportunity to whisper in Zhao Yunlan's ear. "No need to thank me, boss."

Zhao Yunlan gritted his teeth. "I'll thank your fucking ancestors."

But his piggish teammates weren't going to let him off easy. After the three-hour flight finally ended, Lin Jing realized Shen Wei hadn't brought his car. With great enthusiasm, the fake monk eagerly loaded the students into taxis, one by one, and sent them off. That done, he beamed like a matchmaker and said to Shen Wei, "Shen-laoshi, don't you live near Director Zhao? Let him drive you home!"

Zhao Yunlan said nothing, but in his head, he named a little doll "Lin Jing" and stabbed it until it was full of needles like a porcupine.

The curse seemed to have some effect. Lin Jing turned away and sneezed convulsively.

Shen Wei smiled. "No need. I can get a taxi."

With others present, what could Zhao Yunlan say? He could only take charge of Shen Wei's luggage again. "Let me drive you," he said. "It's already dark. If I drive you, it'll be…"

He'd meant to say "it'll be safer," but before the words escaped, he was revisited by the memory of that day in the alley when he'd beaten up a bunch of thugs for Shen Wei—and worse, had acted so cool about it, exactly like a stupid peacock displaying its feathers when it was already showing its ass.

It was a real struggle to keep smiling. Recalling the past was truly unbearable.

During the entire drive, Zhao Yunlan had nothing to say. He drove in the direction of his own home and then, unerringly, to Shen Wei's building. He parked below it and said, "We're here."

Shen Wei didn't move. "How did you know I lived here? You looked me up?"

Zhao Yunlan's laugh was very dry. "I didn't find anything. My lord's identity is seamless."

Shen Wei glanced at him. "The Guardian must have many more questions for me, I suppose?"

Zhao Yunlan didn't reply. Their gazes met in the rearview mirror.

When Shen Wei eventually broke eye contact, he said, "Then why don't you ask?"

Zhao Yunlan was silent a while longer. Finally, he said, "I doubt my lord is using this identity to exist in the Mortal Realm for normal, official business. Is there…some other special reason?"

"No," Shen Wei said, a little distracted. "It's for selfish reasons. It's because of…someone."

By this point, Zhao Yunlan didn't need to ask who "someone" might be.

Shen Wei regretted the words at once. What possible point was there in telling Zhao Yunlan that? What was he hoping to gain by saying it? In that moment, he felt both laughable and despicable.

He was accustomed to being vague. His reply to Zhao Yunlan was essentially the equivalent of carving his own chest open and exposing his heart. He found he didn't want to know how Zhao Yunlan might respond.

Shen Wei hastily ducked his head and opened the car door. "Thank you. I'll go inside now."

Zhao Yunlan didn't respond. Still looking at the rearview mirror, he watched the panicked way Shen Wei got out of the car and realized he was mildly annoyed.

For nearly half a year, he had stopped at absolutely nothing to pursue Shen Wei and had come so close to having him in his grasp. He hadn't let shame or dignity hold him back; the saying "If he wanted the stars, he wouldn't give him the moon," was an apt one. Even if Shen Wei were straight as a steel rod, he would have succumbed by this point. But Zhao Yunlan didn't dare treat the Soul-Executing Emissary the way he had Shen Wei.

He and the Emissary had known each other for years now. They might not be close, but their relationship was a good one. If someone had even the most basic intellect and self-awareness, they would naturally maintain respect and distance with the Soul-Executing Emissary. The Emissary's powers weren't what made him formidable—after all, he'd simply been born with those. No, he was formidable because he was *him*.

The Soul-Executing Emissary had been born in the blackest depths of the Netherworld. Places that dark were what birthed monsters. It was already easy to fall when one was at their lowest, and that was all the more inescapable for beings of absolute darkness born with claws and fangs. Since the dawn of time, the Soul-Executing Emissary was the only aberration who had risen from such uncleanness to become a god.

Even if one day the Soul-Executing Emissary's—*Shen Wei's*—body crumbled and fell into filth, he would still be incomparably noble and unsullied. No one would dare desecrate him.

And now, as Shen Wei left the car, a terrible bleakness overshadowed his face. Zhao Yunlan's heart turned over. With no real idea what he was thinking, he leaned across and grabbed the door. "I've never been inside the Soul-Executing Emissary's territory. Aren't you going to invite me up?"

Shen Wei paused, then nodded. "Gladly."

Zhao Yunlan locked the car and followed Shen Wei upstairs and into the apartment, his mood a little uncertain.

"Please sit," said Shen Wei.

The apartment was pristine, but somehow it didn't quite feel like a home. Looking at the immaculate sofa, Zhao Yunlan almost felt bad for sitting on it. He found himself moving in an extraordinarily polite way.

Shen Wei opened his water dispenser and took out its accompanying kettle, which he filled with cold water. Rather than heating it up, he brought the kettle over directly. He held it in both hands, and the water quickly started to boil. Then he got out tea and teacups, steeping and pouring tea with the smoothness of long practice.

“I only stop by here occasionally, and rarely for long when I do. I’m afraid I don’t have any new tea. I hope you don’t mind.”

Zhao Yunlan didn’t care. It wasn’t as if he could tell the difference between new and stale tea anyway. With the teacup radiating heat into his fingers, he suddenly asked, “My lord, why did you hide your identity from me all this time?”

Shen Wei paused. “If I’d told you, it would have been awkward.”

“You mean you saved *yourself* from feeling awkward and instead you get to watch me feel awkward, right? Did it make you happy seeing me do all those stupid things?”

Rather than answering the question, Shen Wei only smiled good-naturedly. But Zhao Yunlan’s blunt confrontation had slightly eased the awkwardness in the air.

When Shen Wei spoke, it was to say, “About that ghost-faced individual we encountered the other day—if you see him again, you must be careful.”

Zhao Yunlan lowered his head and blew on the leaves on the surface of his tea. “He’s after the Four Hallowed Artifacts?”

“Yes.”

“And what happens when they’re all gathered together?”

“They were created before the equilibrium of yin and yang, Heaven and Earth. It was the beginning of Chaos,” Shen Wei said. “All things had souls but not spirits, life but not death; people were gods, but the gods were as ants. The Four Hallowed Artifacts carry the power of Chaos. If someone with ill will were to gather them together to use them, it could be the end of the world as we know it.

“My position entails certain responsibilities. I would rather destroy the Netherworld’s Hallowed Artifacts than allow them to fall into the hands of anyone who would misuse them.”

Zhao Yunlan was silent for some time, which made Shen Wei uneasy. He didn’t fear Zhao Yunlan’s questions, but he feared the lack of them. Zhao Yunlan knew how to act appropriately and also when to stop. He might never say or ask anything he shouldn’t, but that wouldn’t keep him from piecing things together. What Shen Wei feared the most was not knowing just how much he had already guessed.

Eventually, Zhao Yunlan said, “That ghost ‘face’ was a mask, and you were clearly reluctant for it to come off. Was that because I know his face?”

Shen Wei paled at the confirmation that Zhao Yunlan had noticed. So it *had* been deliberate when he’d aimed his whip at the mask!

Seeing his reaction, Zhao Yunlan immediately stopped himself. “Okay, you don’t need to tell me. I know now. I won’t ask anymore. Just…” He sighed. “Just stop frowning.”

His tone naturally lightened on the last few words, as if that were his usual way of showing that he cared—a vague way that was hard to pinpoint. Shen Wei’s throat went dry. His heart hurt as if it had been scratched.

Zhao Yunlan downed the entire cup of tea in one gulp. Feeling a bit bad about having overstepped a boundary in trying to get information, he got to his feet. “We just spent so much time on the road, and so much happened. You should get some rest, my lord. I’ll let you be.”

As he headed for the door, Shen Wei called after him. “The other day, when I acted out of sorts after drinking, I—other than my soul leaving, did…did I do anything else disgraceful?”

Zhao Yunlan paused. Shen Wei stared at the table, too afraid to look at him.

Smiling, Zhao Yunlan turned back. Where his smiles were so often cold or cocky, this one was unusual. It was intentionally gentle and reassuring. Pointing to himself, he said half-jokingly, “Oh, you absolutely did. You threw yourself at me *very* enthusiastically. It still overwhelms me just thinking about the favor my lord showed me.”

He made his farewells and went downstairs, but before getting in the car, he couldn’t help looking up. Shen Wei’s light was still on. The apartment wasn’t many floors up, and Zhao Yunlan’s keen vision let him see a silhouette at the window, watching him go silently.

It gave him the sense that Shen Wei was always silently watching him depart.

Behind his smiles, Zhao Yunlan’s heart was heavy.

Legend had it that the Soul-Executing Emissary had been born from an incalculable span of tremendous cruelty. A great evil, a soulless being from the end of the Huangquan, his blade like snow… But what Zhao Yunlan remembered was how he always arrived in the dark, then returned to the darkness, forever solitary, even as he walked along the bitterly cold Huangquan Road with souls beyond counting.

He was always alone, and Zhao Yunlan felt sympathy for him.

Whatever kind of connection he’d had with the Soul-Executing Emissary in previous lives, Shen Wei clearly didn’t want him to know, so Zhao Yunlan didn’t try to dig the information out of him. The smothered emotion he’d seen in Shen Wei’s eyes back in the hotel room sparked fear in him; there was something there that he almost didn’t dare touch.

He leaned against the car and smoked an entire cigarette before getting in and slowly driving out of the neighborhood.

By the time Zhao Yunlan got home, Daqing had already been sitting in front of the fridge for quite a while. The first thing the cat did was deploy the royal “we” as he angrily demanded, “Where’s Our cat food? It hasn’t been long at all since We’ve paid attention to you! You dare throw Our cat food away? How dare you? How *dare* you?!”

Shen Wei had thrown the cat food out because it had expired.

Zhao Yunlan ignored him and changed his shoes. Then he poured a little dish of milk and cut a few pieces of sausage and put it all in the microwave to warm up for Daqing. Shen Wei had also been the one who’d stocked his fridge.

Daqing was flabbergasted. He circled Zhao Yunlan’s ankles, then approached to take a sniff. “What’s up with you? Why do you look like you’ve eaten rat poison?”

Zhao Yunlan flopped back on his sofa, stretching his legs. He scooped Daqing up onto his lap and stared into the cat’s eyes. “The year I was ten, you found me and gave me the Soul-Guarding Order.”

Daqing nodded, confused. “You’re already old enough that you want to write a memoir?”

“I was just a happy, stupid child. I thought I was like a male Sailor Moon.” Zhao Yunlan laughed self-deprecatingly and petted the fat cat’s head. “Daqing, tell me the truth now. Who exactly am I?”

Daqing froze.

“You said you were the yao cat who served the Soul-Guarding Order—that you were the one who found the Guardian of each generation. I always thought the Soul-Guarding Order was like an ancient sword with a spirit, and anyone could be the Guardian as long as they met its requirements. But the truth is…there’s only ever been one Guardian, right?”

Daqing stared at him, round eyed. Sometimes he was bad at faking it; at that moment, his gaze barely resembled a cat’s. “Don’t go getting a swollen head—”

“Then where did the True Flame of Samadhi on my left shoulder go?”

Daqing’s fur stood on end. “You remember?”

Zhao Yunlan took a cigarette from his pocket and leaned back into the sofa, feeling weary. “That was a trick, dumbass.”

The black cat said nothing.

“So that means I really *did* have a past life.”

Daqing meowed softly and leaned closer, hesitantly. As if he were an actual furball kitty, he nudged his head against Zhao Yunlan’s belly, then nuzzled it. It was unusual for this dumb fatty to be so agreeable. Zhao Yunlan picked him up and stroked his back.

“I don’t know,” Daqing said. “Back then, my cultivation wasn’t complete. You… Your attitude then was very similar to now—an insolent asshole. Then one day, you were just…gone. For a long time, maybe dozens of years, no one knew where you went. When you finally came back, the True Flame on your left shoulder was gone. You held me and roasted a fish for me. After I ate it, you took out your whip, turned it into three paper talismans, and gave them to me.”

Daqing curled up in Zhao Yunlan’s warm embrace and shut his deep green eyes.

“What did I say?” Zhao Yunlan coaxed gently.

“You said… You said you’d messed up big time. That you probably wouldn’t be able to come back again. I carried the Soul-Guarding Order with me and worked hard on my cultivation. I looked for you for five whole centuries.”

For a moment, Zhao Yunlan thought the heartless black cat was about to cry. His heart melted. He sighed and was just about to say something when Daqing struggled out of his arms, gave his shiny black fur a great shake, and stood on his thigh to issue a decree.

“So you have to treat me better! The microwave has already beeped five or six times. Bring me my milk and little sausages!”

THE STORY CONTINUES IN
Guardian
VOLUME 2

APPENDIX

CHARACTER & NAME GUIDE

CHARACTERS AND ASSOCIATED FACTIONS

The identity of certain characters may be a spoiler; use this guide with caution on your first read of the novel.

SPECIAL INVESTIGATIONS DEPARTMENT (SID)

A police department under the Ministry of Public Security that investigates supernatural crimes in the Mortal Realm. It works with local law enforcement but is not under their jurisdiction.

Zhao Yunlan □□□

Titles: Director of the Special Investigations Department, Guardian to the Soul-Guarding Order □□□□

Weapons: Dagger, whip, paper talismans, gun

Zhao Yunlan was born with his third eye open, naturally able to see ghosts and supernatural creatures within the Mortal Realm. When he was ten years old, a black cat, Daqing, brought him the Soul-Guarding Order, which is how he became the Guardian. Later, with the help of his father at the Ministry of Public Security, he became the Director of the Special Investigations Department.

He wears a watch named Clarity (□□) which has the ability to reflect supernatural presences even when they can't be seen with the naked eye. The name "Clarity" comes from its mirror-like quality and ability to show the truth.

Chu Shuzhi □□□

A mysterious, stoic man of few words. His grim demeanor intimidates Guo Changcheng.

Daqing □□

A talking, fat black cat, and the SID's mascot. Daqing has lived for thousands of years and is very knowledgeable about supernatural and mythological matters. He was the one who brought Zhao Yunlan the Soul-Guarding Order.

Guo Changcheng □□□

The new intern at the Special Investigations Department. An orphan brought up by extended family, his uncle was the one who secured him this job. A recent graduate from college, Guo Changcheng has a great fear of people and often finds it hard to interact with others, especially those in positions of authority, such as his boss. Despite this, he has a heart of gold and often donates his time and money to charities and to help those in need.

Lin Jing □□

A Buddhist monk who doesn't always abide by the strict rules of his religion.

Wang Zheng □□

An employee of the HR Department at the Special Investigations Department. As a ghost, she cannot come in contact with sunlight.

Zhu Hong □□

A dependable member of the Special Investigations Department. Zhu Hong is half human and half snake and can transform into her python form at will, except during a certain period each month when her tail is always visible.

SOUL-GUARDING ORDER

In addition to being head of the Special Investigations Department, Zhao Yunlan is also the Guardian, leader of the Soul-Guarding Order. This is an organization that has existed since ancient times and is responsible for overseeing supernatural matters in the Mortal Realm. The Guardian has authority over those who choose to enter the Order and possesses three special talismans with the words "Soul-Guarding" written on them.

DRAGON CITY UNIVERSITY

Shen Wei □□

A professor at Dragon City University. Well mannered and gentle, he seems to have a mysterious connection to Zhao Yunlan.

Li Qian □□

A graduate student at Dragon City University and a person of interest at the center of the Reincarnation Dial case. Neglected by her parents growing up, she lives in a small apartment off-campus with her grandma, who raised her.

NETHERWORLD

Soul-Executing Emissary □□□

Weapon: Soul-Executing Blade

The Soul-Executing Emissary is a mysterious, powerful figure, feared by Netherworld creatures and members of the SID alike. Zhao Yunlan, who has met him occasionally in the past through his work, is one of the only people who doesn't find him intimidating.

Ten Kings of the Yanluo Courts (Yanluo Kings) □□□□

The highest-ranking officials of the Netherworld, the Ten Kings are final arbiters who decide the fate of each soul based on their previous life's merits and sins. Each presides over a different Hell; these Hells are differentiated by types of crime.

The Magistrate □□

A high-ranking official of the Netherworld who carries out the Yanluo Kings' orders and manages the reapers.

Reapers □□

Low-level Netherworld workers. They are essentially Netherworld law-enforcement officers sent out on tasks and errands, including retrieving newly deceased souls and guiding them to the Netherworld.

OTHER

Ghost-Faced Figure □□□

A mysterious masked figure who seems to be an enemy of the Soul-Executing Emissary.

LOCATIONS

DRAGON CITY: A fictional metropolis where most of the story takes place. It is home to Dragon City University and the Special Investigations Department.

THE NETHERWORLD □□: Where the deceased go after death. Common Chinese folklore believes that when people die, their souls are collected by **reapers (□□)** who lead them through the **Gates of the Netherworld (□□□)** and down the **Huangquan Road (□□□)**. The souls then arrive at the **The Ten Courts of the Yanluo Kings (□□□□)**, where they are judged for their merits and sins. If they committed too many sins, they are sent to the **Eighteen Levels of Hell (□□□□□)**, but if they have accumulated enough good deeds in life, they may move on to reincarnation. In order to reincarnate, these souls first have to walk the **Naihe Bridge (□□□)**, which crosses over the **Wangchuan River (□□□)**, and drink the **Mengpo Soup (□□□)**. After drinking the soup, the soul forgets everything from its past life and is ready to move on to the next one.

HUANGQUAN □□: Literally "Yellow Spring." In Chinese mythology, "Huangquan" is a word that can be used to describe the underworld itself, but can sometimes describe a part of the underworld or a literal, extremely deep body of water souls reach after death. In *Guardian*, it is used as a term for both the road to the underworld and a body of water within the underworld.

NAME GUIDE

DIMINUTIVES, NICKNAMES, AND NAME TAGS

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name. Example: a-Lan

DA-: A prefix meaning “eldest.” Not always used literally—can be added to a name or other diminutive as a way to add respect. Example: dage

XIAO-: A prefix meaning “small” or “youngest.” When added to a name, it expresses affection. Example: xiao-Guo

LAO-: A prefix meaning “old.” Usually added to a surname and used in informal contexts. Example: lao-Wu

GE: Older brother or older male friend. Usually used to refer to a close but respected man older than the speaker. Can be attached to a name as a suffix. Example: Chu-ge

JIE: Older sister or older female friend. Usually used to refer to a close but respected woman older than the speaker. Can be attached to a name as a suffix. Example: Zhu Hong-jie, jiejie

TONGXUE: A general term used to address a student by someone who is not close to them. Used in contexts where calling them by their full name would sound too blunt. Can also be attached to someone’s name as a suffix. Example: Zhao-tongxue.

LAOSHI: A term used to refer to any educator, often in deference. Can also be attached to someone’s name as a suffix. Example: Shen-laoshi.

These affixes can also be combined. Combinations include but are not limited to:

DAGE: Literally means eldest brother, but when used outside family, it is an informal address to insinuate respect and closeness with a male friend older than the speaker.

LAOGE: Literally means elderly brother. In common usage, it’s similar to dage but even less formal and suggests a closer relationship. Usually refers to a significantly older man.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names and sounds from the world of *Guardian*.

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

NOTE ON SPELLING: Romanized Mandarin Chinese words with identical spelling in pinyin—and even pronunciation—may well have different meanings. These words are more easily differentiated in written Chinese, which uses characters.

Zhènhún

zh as in **j**ohn.

en as in **un**derstand.

h as in **h**orse.

un as in **when**.

(juhn hwen)

Zhào Yúnlán

zhao as in **jou**st.

y as in **y**ou.

un as in b**oon**.

lan as in **l**eaf.

an as in r**un**.

(jow yoon lahn)

Shěn Wēi

shen as in **shun**.

wei as in **way**.

(shun way)

Guō Chángchéng

guo as in **Go**rdon.

ch as in **ch**allenge.

ang as in t**ongue**.

ch as in **ch**allenge.

eng as in **uh+ng**.

(gwo chahng chuhng)

Note: The difference between ang and eng is that chang leans more towards ah-ng and eng leans more towards uh-ng.

Dàqìng

da as in **da**rling.

q as in **ch**eap.

ing as in **Eng**lish.

(**da ching)**

Zhù Hóng

zh as in **j**ohn.

u as in f**oo**l.

ho as in **ho**me.

ng as in lo**ng**.

(joo hohng)

Lín Jìng

lin as in **lean**.

jing as in **jing**le.

(leen jing)

Wāng Zhēng

wa as in **wa**nt.

ng as in lo**ng**.

zh as in **j**ohn.

eng as in **uh+ng**.

(wahng juhng)

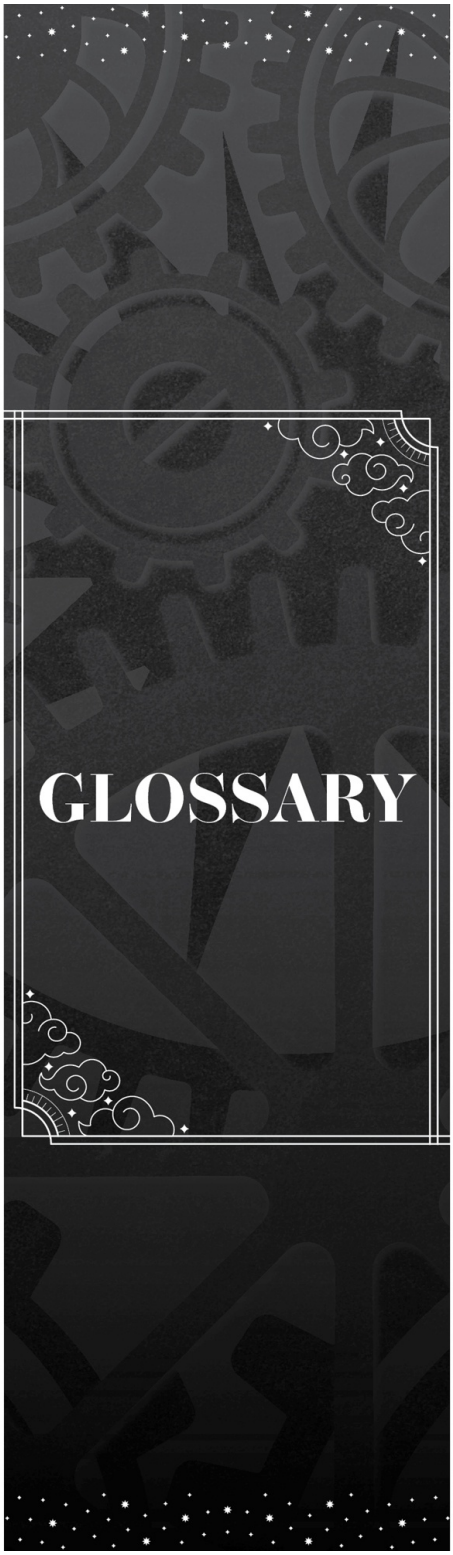
Sāngzàn

sang as in **sung**.

z as in regar**ds**.

an as in r**un**.

(sung zun)


GLOSSARY

GLOSSARY

While not required reading, this glossary is intended to offer further context to the many concepts and terms utilized throughout this novel and provide a starting point for learning more about the rich Chinese culture from which these stories were written.

China is home to dozens of cultures, and its history spans thousands of years. The provided definitions are not strictly universal across all these cultural groups, and this simplified overview is meant for new readers unfamiliar with the concepts. This glossary should not be considered a definitive source, especially for more complex ideas.

GENRES

Danmei

Danmei (□□ / "indulgence in beauty") is a Chinese fiction genre focused on romanticized tales of love and attraction between men. It is analogous to the BL (boys' love) genre in Japanese media. The majority of well-known danmei writers are women writing for women, although all genders produce and enjoy the genre.

Webnovels

Webnovels are novels serialized by chapter online, and the websites that host them are considered spaces for indie and amateur writers. Many novels, dramas, comics, and animated shows produced in China are based on popular webnovels.

Guardian was first serialized on the website JJWXC.

FOLKLORE, MYTHOLOGY, AND RELIGION

In Chinese culture, lines between superstitious and folk beliefs may be blurred. Throughout history as different religions drift in and out of popularity, the people have adapted aspects of various religions into practices that better fit their local culture, sometimes mixing elements from several faiths to create something very different from the original religion. The lore in *Guardian* includes elements from Buddhism, Daoism, other folk religions, and local beliefs, and this is a good reflection on the belief system in China. It's quite common for someone to not be religious but still visit temples on special occasions or to pray for good luck. As such, though all definitions and explanations provided in this glossary may not be the only version out there, we've done our best to provide the most commonly accepted version that pertains to *Guardian*.

Bi Fang □□: A mythological one-legged bird depicted in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*. It's often described as holding a flame in its beak, and known in some folk legends as being the herald of fire.

The Book of Life and Death □□□: A book that keeps record of all living beings, how long they live, and all details of their lives. The Netherworld uses it to keep track of all souls and to know when it's time to collect a soul from the Mortal

Realm.

Buddhism: The central belief of Buddhism is that life is a cycle of suffering and rebirth, only to be escaped by reaching enlightenment (nirvana). Buddhists believe in karma, that a person's actions will influence their fortune in this life and future lives. The teachings of the Buddha are known as The Middle Way and emphasize a practice that is neither extreme asceticism nor extreme indulgence.

Chaos □□: The original state of all matter, which was shaped like an egg before Pangu hacked it open with his axe from the inside and created the world as we know it.

Ghosts □: The spirits of deceased sentient creatures. Ghosts emit yin energy. They come in a variety of types: they can be malevolent or helpful, can retain their former personalities or be fully mindless, and can actively try to interact with the living world to achieve a goal or be little more than a remnant shadow of their former lives.

Hunger ghosts □□□: Ghosts who are punished with an insatiable hunger no matter how much they eat.

Violent ghosts □□: Ghosts with intense spiteful and malicious energy, usually resulting from a violent death or suicide. They tend to roam locations where they died or places that are meaningful to them. They cannot move on unless their source of anger is resolved.

Earthbound spirits □□□: Spirits that, due to resentment or unfulfilled wishes, are bound to a limited area or building, usually related to their death. They are bound there until their wish is fulfilled.

The Heavens: In Chinese culture, the Heavens is a generic yet supreme power, universal and formless, that enforces order upon all matter, often manifesting as forces of nature. It's not a place or a god, but even presides over gods.

Merits □□: Merits are "points" a person accumulates throughout their lifetime that determine their karma. The more good things one does, the more merits they accumulate. The more merits they have, the better their karma. In the end, their karma decides what they are reincarnated as in the next life.

Pangu □□: A primordial god who separated the clear from the turbid, forming Heaven and Earth out of the Chaos, thus creating the world.

Six Paths of Reincarnation/Reincarnation Cycle □□□□: The Six Paths of Reincarnation are six different realms of existence a soul may be reborn into: god, demi-god, human, animal, starvation, and hell. The previous life's karma determines which realm they reincarnate into in the next life.

Third Eye □□□: An innate ability a person is naturally born with that allows them to see ghosts and other supernatural things in the Mortal Realm. This is sometimes described as one's third eye being open.

Three Ethereal Souls and Seven Corporeal Souls □□□□: In traditional Chinese belief, humans possess two kinds of souls: ethereal souls (□) represent the spirit and intellect and leave the body after death, whereas corporeal souls (□) are earth-bound and remain with the body of the deceased. Different traditions claim there are different numbers of each, but three ethereal souls and seven corporeal souls is common in Daoism.

Three-Life Rock □□□: It's said that on the shore of the Wangchuan River, there is a large rock with two long markings going through it that divide the rock into three parts, representing the past life, the present life, and the future life.

The Three Realms: Traditionally, the universe is divided into three realms: the Heavenly Realm, the Mortal Realm, and the Netherworld. The Heavenly Realm is where gods reside and rule, the Mortal Realm refers to the realm of the living, and the Netherworld refers to the realm of the dead. However, in *Guardian*, the gods do not live in the Heavenly Realm; they live in the Mortal Realm.

The Three Sovereigns □□□□

Fuxi □□: One of the Three Sovereigns of ancient mythology, said to have the head of a human and the body of a snake. According to legend, Fuxi is Nüwa's brother or spouse (or both), as well as the ancestor to the humans who came after.

Nüwa □□: One of the Three Sovereigns of ancient mythology, with the head of a human and the body of a snake. She is best known for patching up the hole in the sky and for creating humans out of mud; therefore, she is known as the ancestor to all humans.

Shennong □□: One of the Three Sovereigns of ancient mythology, known in folk legends as the inventor of agriculture and herbal medicine.

True Flames of Samadhi □□□□: A concept of both Daoist and Buddhist origin. In *Guardian*, it refers to both a special fire that Zhao Yunlan manages to obtain from the Bi Fang bird, as well as the three soul fires every person possesses: one located on the top of their head and another on each shoulder.

GENERAL CHINESE CULTURE

Birth chart □□□□: A series of eight characters assigned to a person based on the Sexagenary Cycle (Tian Gan Di Zhi/Heavenly Stems, Earthly Branches). Two characters each are assigned according to their birth year, month, day, and hour, forming eight characters in total. It's thought that one's fate can be told from their birth chart. Usually, when one's birth chart is "too light," it means they have a hard life ahead, perhaps suffering illnesses or other traumatic events. And when one's birth chart is "too hard," one might cause other people who have "lighter" birth charts to die.

Chinese Calendar: The traditional Chinese calendar is a combination of the lunar and solar calendars. Nowadays, it is more common to use the Gregorian calendar to keep track of dates. The Chinese calendar is more often used for traditional holidays (Lunar New Year, Mid-Autumn, etc.), and occasionally, people will keep track of their Chinese calendar birthday. Using the Chinese calendar is considered a little unusual—though perhaps more common with older people.

Cinnabar □□: A red mineral pigment used for drawing paper talismans. A form of mercury sulfide, it's traditionally thought to have mind-calming effects and is effective for dispelling evil.

Dageng □□: In the times before clocks, this was the traditional system for telling time at night. A night watchman would walk around town with a gong or a woodblock, striking five times throughout the night, once every geng, or roughly every 2.4 hours.

Death rituals: After a person dies, their family will lay out food, burn incense, spirit money, and paper renditions of objects to help the dead in the Netherworld. There are specialty funeral stores that will sell various papier-mâché objects specifically for funerals. These offerings, especially spirit money, incense, and food, will be continuously offered after the deceased has died to pay respects.

Feng shui □□: Literally translates to wind-water. Refers to the natural laws believed to govern the flow of qi in the arrangement of the natural environment and man-made structures. Favorable feng shui and good qi flow have various beneficial effects to everyday life and the practice of cultivation, while the opposite is true for unfavorable feng shui and bad qi flow.

Ghost Festival □□□/□□□: A traditional festival that falls on the 15th night of the seventh lunar month. During this festival, the living pay homage to their ancestors. It is when the dead are believed to pay a visit to the Mortal Realm.

Mourning Birds □□□: Large crows that are said to announce the arrival of a calamity.

Touqi □□: The first seven days after a person's death. It is believed that a new ghost will visit their family on the seventh day after their death to take one last look before they move on. The family will serve food and lock themselves in their rooms so the ghost won't become attached and refuse to move on.

Yin/yang energy □/□□: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy that describes the complementary interdependence of opposite/contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and differences. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy in a person's body can act as the driving force for malevolent spirits that are seeking to replenish themselves of whichever they lack. Those with strong yang energy (e.g., men) are considered effective at warding off yin-natured supernatural beings (e.g., ghosts).

BOOKS REFERENCED IN GUARDIAN

The text of *Guardian* mentions many real-life books and stories, in addition to the many fictional tales that only exist within the novel. This is a list of the real books referenced within the text for your further research if desired.

Investiture of the Gods by Xu Zhonglin (uncertainly attributed) - □□□□

Journey to the West by Wu Cheng'en - □□□

Heroes in Sui and Tang Dynasty by Chu Renhuo - □□□□

New Year's Sacrifice by Lu Xun - □□

The Ranking of Weapons (□□□) is a fictional book borrowed from the famous wuxia novel series by Gu Long, *Xiaoli Feidao* (□□□□).

MEASUREMENTS

Measurements have changed during different periods of Chinese history, but these are what they are generally accepted as today. They are often only used as approximations and not to be taken literally. For example, something described as "thousands of zhang" is just very large.

Cun □ - roughly 3 centimeters

Chi □ - roughly ⅓ meter

Zhang □ - roughly 3⅓ meters

10 cun = 1 chi

10 chi = 1 zhang

GUARDIAN-SPECIFIC TERMINOLOGY

Four Hallowed Artifacts of the Netherworld □□□□□: Within the fictional world of *Guardian*, these are four sacred artifacts that are said to be passed down since primordial times, related to a seal that affects the balance between yin and yang, reincarnation, and life and death. They include:

Reincarnation Dial □□□: Made from pieces of the Three-Life Rock, with scales from a black fish from the Wangchuan River. One can use the Reincarnation Dial to give a portion of their life to an older person, thus shortening their own life.

Mountain-River Awl □□□: A large, octagonal pillar that pierces into the ground in the sacred place of the Hanga Tribe. Formed from the spirits of tens of thousands of mountains and rivers, it can absorb and imprison spirits of the dead.

The remaining two Hallowed Artifacts have yet to be recovered.

Record of Merits □□□: A record that tracks the merits one has earned throughout their different lives.

RACES

Wu □□: A race of beings that existed around the time of creation.

Yao □□: Animals or plants that have gained spiritual consciousness after years of absorbing the essences of Heaven and Earth from their surroundings. Especially high-level or long-lived yao are able to take on a human form after diligent cultivation. This concept is comparable to Japanese yokai, which is a loanword from the Chinese yao. Yao are not evil by nature but often come into conflict with humans for various reasons, one being that the modern world is not conducive to cultivating.

Humans □□: Beings created by Nüwa in the likeness of the gods. For the most part, humans rarely successfully achieve anything from cultivation.

Gods □: Powerful deities that existed before humans.

Youchu □□: Monstrous creatures born from the Chaos. They come in all shapes and sizes. These are fictional monsters within the world of *Guardian*, not taken directly from any real-world religion or mythology.

About the Author

priest

An internationally renowned author who writes forthe novel serialization website, JJWXC, priest's books have inspired multimedia adaptations and been published in numerous languages around the world. priest is known for writing compelling drama that incorporates humor and creativity, and a grand sense of style that infuses her world-building. Her works include S*tars of Chaos: Sha Po Lang*, *Guardian: Zhen Hun*, *Liu Yao: The Revitalization of Fuyao Sect, Mo Du (Silent Reading)*, and *Can Ci Pin (The Defective)*, among others.

Footnotes

1. An echo bug is a mythological creature that lives in a person's stomach and echoes everything they say.

2. A sishu (□□) was a private class held by rich families for their children in ancient China. These do not exist in the present day. Xiansheng (□□) is an archaic word for "teacher."

3. Dealing with the supernatural or the dead often involves the use of cinnabar (□□). Paper hats are used for funerals.

4. The Chinese onomatopoeia for a dog barking is "wang wang" (□□). Because Guo Changcheng sounds like he's barking, Daqing responds with a sarcastic, "Meow."

5. "Tongxue" is a way to address a student by someone who is not close to them in contexts where using their full name would sound too blunt. It can also be attached to someone's name as a suffix, for example, Zhao-tongxue.

6. In Chinese mythology, hell has eighteen levels (□□□□□).

7. Four (□, sì), which sounds like "death" (□, siˇˇ), is an unlucky number.

8. While yin and yang symbolize balance, the living are more associated with yang energy and the dead are more associated with yin energy.

9. The Three Realms (□□) refers to the Heavens (home of the gods), the Mortal Realm (home of the living), and the Netherworld (home of the dead).

10. Aunt Xianglin is a famous, tragic character from the story "New Year's Sacrifice" by Lu Xun, forced to remarry after her first husband's death and later shunned as unlucky when her second husband and son also die. She notably tells the story of her sufferings repeatedly before her death when the town bars her from a New Year's sacrifice. In modern pop culture, she's used as shorthand for a naggy person.

11. The Chinese birth chart (□□□□) is a series of eight characters assigned to you based on the Sexagenary Cycle Calendar. Two characters each are assigned according to your birth year, month, day, and hour, forming eight characters in total. It is believed that one's fate can be told from their birth chart.

12. One chi (□) is 33.33 cm, and one cun (□) is one tenth of a chi, or 3.33 cm.

13. There are ten courts in the Netherworld, each controlled by a king. Together, they are known as the Ten Kings of the Yanluo Courts (□□□□), and they judge the souls that have died.

14. Idiom (□□□) indicating someone is obtuse or not attuned to subtlety.

15. In the classic Chinese novel Investiture of the Gods (written in the late 1500s and early 1600s), a Soul-Dispatching Flag was used in battle. The reverse, a Soul-Beckoning Flag, would assumedly draw souls in.

16. Lin Jing is reciting part of the Heart Sutra, one of the more well-known sutras in the practice of Buddhism. The sutra discusses the practice of wisdom beyond studying rules, but because the character for "form" (□ sè) is sometimes used for discussing sex, one humorous reinterpretation is "lust is a hollow goal."

17. Benefactor (□□) is a form of address monks use for the general public.

18. Spiritual merits (□□) accumulate through doing good deeds in life. The more merits you have, the better your karma, which will affect how good your next life will be.

19. The Huangquan (□□), or Yellow Springs, are a body of water in the Netherworld where spirits go when they die. Thus the road from the Mortal Realm to the Ghost Realm is the Huangquan Road.

20. The Six Paths of Reincarnation (□□□□) are six different realms of existence where a soul may enter each new life: gods, demi-gods, humans, animals, violent ghosts, and hell.

21. A line from a poem by the Qing Dynasty poet Nara Singde.

22. The Ghost Festival (□□□) falls on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month. On that day, the living pay homage to their ancestors and the dead visit the Mortal Realm.

23. Gui □ is a word that usually describes ghosts, but can also encompass other heinous entities.

24. Fuxi (□□), Nüwa (□□), and Shennong (□□) are the Three Sovereigns, primordial gods in Chinese mythology. Fuxi, first of the Three Sovereigns, is credited

with teaching humanity to cook, fish, hunt, and write. Nüwa, second of the Three Sovereigns, created humans, and in traditional mythology repaired the sky when the pillars supporting it fell. And Shennong, last of the Three Sovereigns, taught the people how to farm and use traditional Chinese medicine.

25. Pangu (□□) was the first being in Chinese mythology, who came out of the egg containing the universe, split yin from yang, and pushed apart the sky and the earth.

26. In Guardian, the wu (□) were a race of people who existed in ancient times.

27. The yao (□) are non-human spirits that have cultivated to consciousness and have longer life spans.

28. Dageng (□□) is a traditional method for time-telling at night. A night watchman would walk around town with a gong or a woodblock, striking five times throughout the night, roughly once every 2.4 hours.

29. The Book of Life and Death (□□□) is a book that keeps record of all living beings, how long they live, and all details of their current life so the Netherworld can keep track of all the souls. This is how the reapers know it's time to collect a soul from the Mortal Realm.

30. Nian (□) is a monster in Chinese mythology. Every year, in order to scare it away, people wore red and set off fireworks, which is why the Chinese word for year is "Nian."

31. Baijiu (□□) is a strong, colorless Chinese liquor that usually has an alcohol percentage of 35-60%.

32. The Six Directions (□□) are: up, down, left, right, forward, and backward. They define all of physical space.

33. A group of people originating from the area of Kham in central Tibet.

34. A pre-Buddhism Tibetan religion.

35. A fictional, inextinguishable flame.

36. The Bi Fang (□□) is an auspicious bird from Chinese mythology. The Classic of Mountains and Seas describes it as a one-legged, crane-like green bird with red markings and a white beak, and warns that the Bi Fang may carry dangerous fire.

37. According to traditional beliefs, every human has three ethereal souls (□ hun) which leave the body after death, and seven corporeal souls (□ po) that remain with the corpse.

38. Isatis indigotica (□□□), a traditional Chinese herbal medicine commonly used for colds.

Investigations in the Dark

Zhao Yunlan heads up a covert division of the Ministry of Public Security that deals with the strange and unusual, blurring the line between the mortal realm and the Netherworld. His cocky, casual attitude conceals a sharp mind and an arsenal of mystical tools and arcane knowledge.

While investigating a gruesome death at a local university, Zhao Yunlan crosses paths with the reserved Professor Shen Wei. Zhao Yunlan is immediately intrigued by Shen Wei's good looks and intense gaze, and the attraction between them is immediate and powerful, even as Shen Wei tries to keep his distance. Shen Wei and his secrets are a puzzle Zhao Yunlan feels compelled to solve as mysterious circumstances throw them together, and their connection becomes impossible to deny.

FROM THE AUTHOR OF *STARS OF CHAOS: SHA PO LANG* AND *FARAWAY WANDERERS* COMES *GUARDIAN*, THE HIT NOVEL SERIES THAT INSPIRED A LIVE-ACTION TV SHOW.

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